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Short Stories

Twice A Month

February 25th

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novel*

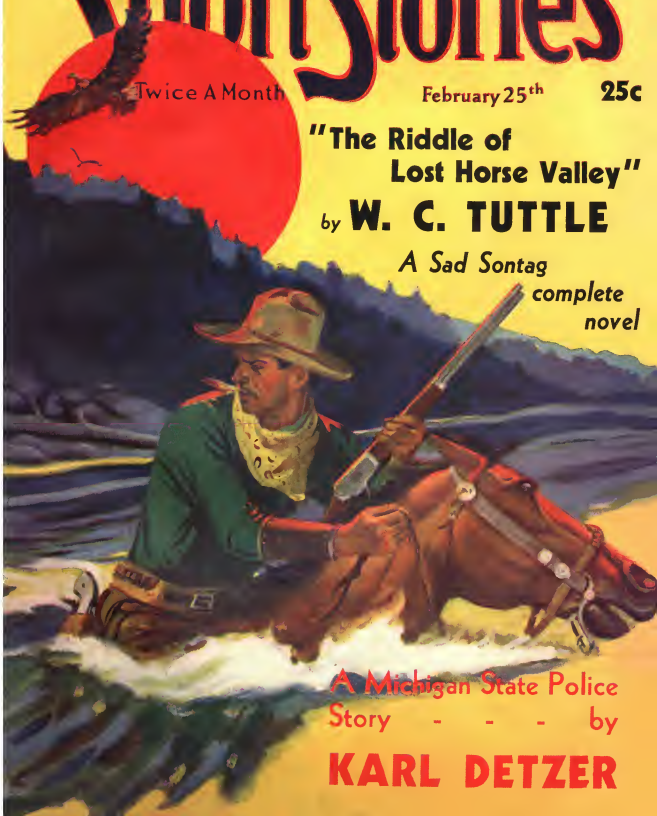
*A Michigan State Police
Story - - - by*

KARL DETZER

Vol. CLIV, No. 4
Whole No. 724

SHORT STORIES

February 25th
1936



Wouldn't you like to get thru the winter *without* **CATCHING COLD?**

Your chances of doing so are better if you will treat a cold for what it is—an infection calling for germicidal action

SOMETHING new is going on—something that will interest you if you are subject to colds and sore throat.

People who used to catch colds and dose them vainly, now take steps to fight having them at all. They have stopped planning to cure, and have begun trying to prevent these troublesome and often dangerous ailments.

Today, colds stand revealed in their true light. They are no more nor less than infections, involving germs. The way to treat such infections is with germicidal action which destroys bacteria.

We ask you to read carefully the results of several tests, made under medical supervision, during the winters of 1930-1931, 1931-1932, and 1934.

During these years, large groups of people were divided into two classes: those who gargled with Listerine twice a day or oftener, and those who did not gargle at all.

In a majority of tests it was shown that those who gargled with Listerine caught fewer colds than those who did not gargle with it. More-



over, when Listerine users did catch cold, the colds were milder, and were of shorter duration, than the infections of non-users.

Against sore throat Listerine was similarly successful—fewer cases for those who used it.

Bear in mind that these results did not spring out of one test made during one year but out of many tests made during several years. Thus does science lend corroboration to the testimony of literally thousands of satisfied Listerine users who have found this safe antiseptic so helpful in checking respiratory infections.

Don't wait till a cold takes hold of you, and you are forced to dose it with internal drugs of questionable effect. Get in the habit of using Listerine twice a day as a preventive measure. Listerine not only kills germs associated with sore throat and colds, on the mucous membrane of the oral cavity, but also renders the mouth clean and sweet and the breath agreeable. Lambert Pharmacal Company, St. Louis, Mo.

Listerine

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BUT YOU DON'T NEED MUCH MONEY WITH THEIR NEW FINANCE PLAN. COME ON UP TO THE HOUSE - I'VE GOT ANOTHER ONE OF THEIR ADS - YOU CAN SEND IN THE COUPON RIGHT NOW!

BOTH! - IT SEEMS LIKE A FELLOW'S GOT TO HAVE A CAR AND PLENTY OF DOUGH TO GET THE BREAKS THESE DAYS

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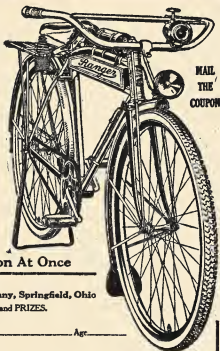
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Short

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*Sad Sontag and Swede Harrigan Carelessly Ride in
and Hear of—*

THE RIDDLE OF LOST HORSE VALLEY

*—and Knowing Horses Don't Have
Wings, They Begin to Read Sign, and Find Plenty Bullet Tracks*



By W. C. TUTTLE

Author of "Flames of Fate," "Desert Dreams," etc.

SAD SONTAG and Swede Harri-
gan walked out of the Central
Hotel in Dry Wells, their high-
heels clicking on the worn floor of
the old porch. It was a wide old
porch, with a low railing, shaded by huge
cottonwoods, and plentifully supplied with
chairs.

Sad and Swede had finished their sup-
per, and now they sat down, elevated their
boots to the top of the railing, and pro-
ceeded to roll cigarettes. Midway of the
porch sat an old rawhider, his slouch hat
tilted over one eye. They had seen him
earlier in the day, riding into town on a

tired horse, and had later seen him at a
bar, drinking heavily.

Slowly he turned his head and looked at
Sad and Swede. Then, without any pre-
lude, he lifted his head and began singing,
beating time on the arm of his chair.

"Old Bill Green was a nice old man,
As nice as any man could be-e-e.
He only swore when he got mad,
Which showed he had pie-et-tee-e-e.
He-e-e only et when he got hungry
And slept when he had to yawn;
But he stole four horses, 'cause he felt like
stealin',



And they hung him in the da-a-a-awn.
O-o-o-oh, they hung Bill Green in the dawnin',

For his crime he then did pa-a-ay.

'Twas a little early, but they only had a clothes-line,

And this was their wash da-a-a-ay."

The old rawhider turned his head and squinted at Sad Sontag.

"How'd yuh like it?" he asked soberly.

"Me? Well, I'll tell yuh, pardner," replied Sad, "I ain't heard nothin' like it since Caruso sung 'The Old Oaken Bucket.'"

"Well, that's real cheerful and kind of yuh, feller. I reckon that Caruso feller was good, too. We had a phonygraft record of hisn, up at the K Bar K, but it was cracked. He'd jist git started on a lot of that there furrin' howlin', when the old phonygraft would go, 'Hickety, hick, hickety, hick, hickety, hick'. It was real pretty, up to the hickety-hicks."

"Where's this K Bar K spread?" asked Swede.

"North of here, about twenty-five miles—up in Lost Horse Valley."

"You workin' for the K Bar K?"

The old rawhider rubbed his chin thoughtfully, as he hitched around in his chair.

"Well, I'll tell yuh—I am—and I ain't. I——"

The old rawhider hesitated, as a locomotive whistled for Dry Wells. It was the six o'clock passenger train from the west. He got to his feet, both hands on the railing, as he craned his neck, looking toward the depot, which was at the upper end of the street.

A moment later he was staggering backwards, clutching at open air, and from somewhere across the street came the whip-like crack of a rifle. The old rawhider went down in a heap, jerked convulsively—and was still.

Sad and Swede were out of their chairs, trying to locate the shooter, but the limbs of the cottonwoods masked them from across the street. Men came running from

the hotel, while others came from the street. Many had heard the shot, but none knew where it had been fired.

BILL TILTON, the tall, gaunt sheriff, and Zibe Underwood, his deputy, bow-legged and of half-pint size, came and took charge.

"Arizony Ames—and he's dead," declared the sheriff, as a doctor came hurrying. He turned and looked around at the crowd.

"Who seen this done?" he asked.

"The shot came from across the street," replied Sad. "Me and my pardner was talkin' with him, just before he got hit."

"Yea-a-ah? Well," the sheriff drew his hat over one eye and looked critically at the tall, lean cowboy, "who might you be, stranger?"

"I'm merely tellin' you what happened," replied Sad, ignoring the question "This man was talkin' about the K Bar K, when the train whistled. He got to his feet, both hands on the railin' of the porch, and was leanin' out, lookin' toward the depot, when the bullet hit him."

"Here comes Lucius Kimball and his family," said someone.

Lucius Kimball, owner of the K Bar K, was not a Westerner in the true sense of the word; he was a well-known financier who raised horses and operated a ranch as a hobby. He was a big man, with blocky features, hard blue eyes and a severe jaw. His wife was a portly woman, well groomed, refined. The daughter, Lorna, about twenty years of age, was making her first trip to the rangeland. She was a handsome brunette youngster, looking with wide-eyed amazement at this group of hard-bitted men, surrounding the body on the porch.

"What is wrong here?" asked Kimball.

"Yuh better take the women inside, Mr. Kimball," said the sheriff. "A man has been murdered; one of yore men."

"One of my men?"

"Arizony Ames, one of yore wranglers, Mr. Kimball."

"Oh!" grunted Kimball. "Well, do what you can for him, Tilton."

The Kimball family passed into the hotel. The sheriff sighed.

"Well, I reckon it was murder," he said.

"Bill," said Underwood, the deputy, "sometimes yuh amaze me. And me thinkin' all the time that it was suicide."

"Suicide! How the hell could yuh figure it thataway, Zibe?"

"Oh, jist to be different, I reckon," chuckled Zibe Underwood.

"I don't like to horn in," said Sad, "but it might be a good scheme to try and find out where the shot was fired from, and who fired it."

"Yuh don't suppose they're still standin' there, holdin' the gun, and waitin' for us to show up, do yuh?" asked the sheriff.

"My mistake," sighed Sad, and stood aside, as the men prepared to carry the body away.

Later Sad and Swede walked out on the street. Directly across from the hotel was a two-story building, the upper story used as a rooming house, while the lower floor was a big saloon.

"That shot came from one of them upper rooms, Swede," declared Sad, as they walked over to the saloon. "I wonder why they killed the old man—or did he have somethin' to tell Kimball?"

"Yuh mean—they shut his mouth before Kimball got here?"

"It kinda looks thataway."

MURDER was the topic of conversation in the saloon, but no one seemed to have any reasonable theory. Apparently Arizona Ames had been with the K Bar K a long time.

"What'd Kimball have t' say?" queried the bartender.

"Mourned right out loud," replied a cowboy soberly. "I never seen a man take on so hard. Yessir, he shore took it to heart. He told the sheriff to do what he could for him. Kimball is shore a big-hearted feller."

"What's one cowpuncher, more or less

to Kimball?" said another cow-waddie. "He's got so much money that he don't even know who's workin' for him. That's a fact. Why, he packs a roll of bills bigger around than my laig. Must be close to a million."

There seemed to be a general antipathy against Lucius Kimball, because of his wealth. Apparently Kimball voiced and acted his superiority, and the natives resented it.

"Yuh can see what money'll do," stated Puggy Jones, the stage-driver. "The Bar S and the Thirty-three has lost plenty horses, but the K Bar K ain't never lost one. Things is gittin' tight up there in Lost Horse Valley, I'll tell yuh that. Mebbe that's why Kimball is out here."

"It shore looks as though somebody shut old Arizony's mouth," said Sad, as he and Swede walked back to the hotel. "He came here to meet Kimball."

Lucius Kimball was standing in the semi-darkness of the porch, smoking an expensive cigar. Sad and Swede sat down in two of the creaking old rockers, and Kimball came over to them.

"I believe you are the two men who were here, when that man was shot," he said quietly.

"That's right," agreed Sad.

"The sheriff told me," explained Kimball, as he drew up a chair. "He said you were talking with him, just before he was killed. Is that true?"

"He sang us a song," replied Sad. "Maybe he'd been drinkin'. We discussed the song, and he mentioned a phonograph record they had at the K Bar K. We asked him if he was workin' for the K Bar K, and he said, 'I am—and I ain't.' Just at that moment the train whistled, and he got to his feet. Then he went down—killed instantly, I reckon."

"I see," replied Kimball quietly. "Any idea where the bullet came from?"

"Upstairs over that saloon across the street," replied Sad. "The sheriff didn't seem to think it was worth while goin' over there."

"The sheriff," replied Lucius Kimball, "is damned incompetent." He smoked quietly for a minute or two.

"Are you boys from Lost Horse Valley?" he asked.

"No," replied Sad. "We've been breakin' horses for the Stovall outfit, down near Piperock Springs. Finished the job yesterday."

"I raise horses at the K Bar K," stated Kimball. "I've spent a lot of money in blooded stock; a lot of money. During the past year there has apparently been a lot of horses stolen in the valley. The Thirty-three and the Bar S outfits have suffered



badly; and because none of my horses have been taken—well, that is the situation."

"They've been kinda wonderin' why yore outfit is exempt, eh?" smiled Sad.

"Exactly. But that condition does not apply just now. Thirty head of my best young stock disappeared a week ago. That is why I am here. My foreman wired me at San Francisco, but I was unable to come sooner."

"Thirty head, eh? That's quite a bunch to lose, Mr. Kimball."

"Worth at least a thousand dollars per head, as soon as they are broken to polo. I have the finest studs and brood mares in the world. I never do things in a small way."

"Some horse thieves are thataway, too," drawled Swede.

"I am finding that out," growled Kimball.

"It kinda looks to me as though Arizona Ames came here to tell you somethin'," said Sad. "Mebbe he knew where yore horses went."

"I have been thinking about that. Thank you for your information."

Kimball got up and went into the hotel. Sad yawned and looked at the twinkling stars through the cottonwood branches.

"Lost Horse Valley sounds like an interestin' place, Swede," he commented. "And it's only about twenty-five miles."

II

PUGGY JONES, sixty years of age, a stage driver for ten of them, slammed on the brake, and with a steady pull on the lines set the four horses back, with traces jingling. The rear wheels of the old stage skidded perilously near the outer edge of the rocky grade, but clucked into a rut, and stopped with a jar.

Puggy wrinkled the button-like nose, which gave him his nickname, and glanced sideways at Lorna Kimball, on the seat beside him.

"Wouldn't that rasp yuh?" he asked her. "Wouldn't it, now?"

But the wide-eyed girl never heard him, because she was staring at the two men, with leveled Winchesters, who were blocking the road.

"Never mind answerin'," sighed Puggy dismally. "I s'pose it would."

"Keep yore hands quiet," warned a masked man, as he stepped near the stage.

"Yuh won't mind if m' jaw quivers, will yuh?" asked Puggy. "Yuh see, I've got to shake some'ers."

The stage door swung open and Lucius Kimball stepped out on the grade. Quickly the rifle swung to cover the big man.

"Watch that driver!" snapped the near man. "Keep yore hands in sight," he warned Kimball.

"Is this a hold-up?" growled Kimball.

"Shucks, no," chuckled the bandit. "We're takin' up a collection for widowers and orphans. My pardner's a widower, and I'm an orphan. Oh-oh!"

Mrs. Kimball stepped heavily out of the stage, and Lucius Kimball groaned. The bandit chuckled joyfully.

"What is it, Lucius?" she asked.

"A hold-up," he replied shortly.

"Correct!" snapped the bandit. "Take off yore hat, feller. That's right. Tell the lady to put her diamonds in that hat. She's wearin' plenty of 'em."

"I'll not do it!" snapped Mrs. Kimball. "Give you my diamonds? Indeed, I shall not."

"Suit yourself, lady. After the stage goes on—without yuh—we'll take 'em off. And yore husband might as well dig up his money now, 'cause we ain't wastin' no more time. Dig!"

Five minutes later the other bandit said:

"What about the girl? She must have somethin'."

"She's got plenty nerve," replied the leading bandit, backing away. He motioned to Puggy. "Pull out," he ordered.

"Thank yuh kindly," replied Puggy. "Yuh might as well leave the treasure-box there on the road; it's empty."

"Mebbe we'll keep it for a soo-ve-neer of a smart driver. Keep goin', and don't look back."

Puggy kicked off the brake, spoke sharply to the team, and drove on down the grade. He squinted sideways at Lorna.

"Was yuh scared?" he asked.

"I certainly was! But wasn't it thrilling?"

"Ask yore ma and pa."

"That's true, I suppose. Mother loved her diamonds. Dad told her to leave them at home, but she insisted. Oh, I never expected to be held up by real robbers! But they were real nice about it, don't you think?"

"Oh, shore. They're a couple nice boys, havin' fun. Makin' money at it, too. Shore overlooked a good bet, though. I've got my sixty dollar salary in m' pocket."

"Would you have given it to them?" asked Lorna.

"If they'd asked—shore. I'm a generous soul. Is this yore first trip out here?"

"Yes. I think this country is thrilling."

"Yeah, it's all right, when yuh git used

to it. I didn't like it at first—but I'm kinda gittin' into the swing of things now."

"How long have you been here?"

"Forty-five years, next September. See that range of hills over there? Well, mebbey yuh won't believe it, but they wasn't knee-high, when I came here. Everythin' grows fast here. How long you goin' to stay here?"

"Dad said we might stay a week."

"Well, the climate won't affect yuh none in a week. Soon's we git off this mesa, we'll be in sight of Bear Paw City."

"Is it a big city?" asked the girl curiously.

"Well, it ain't so awful big; but it's our leadin' flesh-pot. We don't need a awful big city."

III

CLOUDY KNIGHT, cook at the K Bar K, took an extra big drink of whisky, shoved the jug back into the cupboard, and went out to the spacious porch of the ranch-house for his afternoon siesta. Cloudy didn't have to cook dinner, because the boys were all away; so he could sleep a couple of hours, before cooking supper.

He was snoring blissfully in an old rocking-chair, when a team drove up to the front of the house. Cloudy snorted, jerked upright and looked at the Kimball family, who were getting out of the buggy. Cloudy had never seen Lucius Kimball before.

"Hyah, Cloudy," called the driver.

"Lo," grunted the cook huskily. Kimball yanked a valise out of the buggy, and scowled at Cloudy.

"What sort of a place am I running?" he demanded angrily.

"Huh?" grunted Cloudy. "What sort of a place are *you* runnin'? If this is a guessin' contest, I'd say you run a gamblin' house."

"Who are you?" asked Kimball.

"Me? I'm the best cook on earth. M' name's Knight, and I don't take a back seat for no danged dough-puncher. Who'r you, feller?"

"I am Lucius Kimball."

"Oh—my—gosh!" breathed the cook.

"Why, I—Lonny, you lazy cross between a huh and a uh-huh, why don'tcha git down and help Mr. Kimball unload his satchels?"

"Team'd run away, 'f I did," drawled Lonny Frazer.

"Where is Dell Burke?" demanded Kimball.

"He's out workin'," replied Cloudy. "Everybody's gone some'ers, except me."

"Why didn't Dell Burke meet us in Dry Wells?"

"Well, I don't reckon he knowed you was comin'. If he did he never said nothin' 'bout it. You folks go right into the house."

"I hope it is clean and comfortable," said Mrs. Kimball.

"Oh—my!" breathed Cloudy, and watched them go into the house.

"A couple men stuck 'em up on the grades, between here and Dry Wells," informed Lonny. "Took Kimball's roll and the old lady's jewelry. Man, are they sore! Hired me to drive 'em out here from Bear Paw City. Ain't that girl a dinger?"

"Held 'em up, eh? Seven Toed Pete! That ain't goin' to make it any easier f'r me. 'F we'd only known they was comin'! Hell, it would take a week to swamp out that place for a millionaire family! Lonny, will yuh stay here a few minutes; yuh might have a passenger back to town."

"Here comes Dell Burke and Scotty McKenzie," said Lonny.

"Stick around," advised Cloudy. "Yuh might have more'n one to haul to town, Lonny."

Burke and McKenzie rode up to the house, looking curiously at Lonny Frazer and his two-seater buggy.

"Kimball's here, with his whole damn family!" hissed Cloudy.

"Kimball!" exclaimed Dell Burke, a well-built cowboy, about thirty years of age, with a cynically handsome face, and a mop of curly, brown hair. Scotty McKenzie was a hatchet-faced, buck-toothed cow-

puncher, rated top-hand as a cowboy, but very ignorant.

"And he got stuck up on his way from Dry Wells, on the stage," added Cloudy. "Lost his roll, and the old lady lost her jewels."

"Lovely dove!" breathed Dell Burke. "And the house not cleaned!"

KIMBALL came out on the porch, literally breathing fire and brimstone. He saw Burke, who had dismounted and was coming up to the porch.

"Why in the devil didn't you meet us at Dry Wells, Burke?" he asked.

"I didn't know you were comin', Mr. Kimball."

"I wrote you a week ago."

"Yuh did? That's funny; I never got the letter."

"Well, I sent it. You!" He turned on Cloudy Knight. "Get into that house and start cleaning it. It is a crime to let a place get so filthy. Clean out two of those bedrooms, at once. If you can't keep the place clean, I'll hire a cook that can."

"Wait a minute, Cloudy," interposed Dell quickly. "Mr. Kimball didn't exactly mean that. Yuh see, Mr. Kimball, Cloudy is the best cook in the country, and it ain't hardly fair for you to jump him like that. If he'd known you was comin', he'd have cleaned up the place."

"I'm the best damn cook, between here and Dawson City," declared Cloudy, "and no damned millionaire can tell me what to do."

"All right, Cloudy," soothed Dell. "Go in and do a little work."

"Shore I'll do it, Dell. But yuh better tell them females to vacate the house, before I git to throwin' soap and water."

"You might explain it to them," suggested Kimball.

"Not me!" snapped the cook. "I never speak to folks I ain't been properly introduced to."

"Swamp out the kitchen," ordered Dell. "By that time somebody will introduce yuh."

"All right."

Lonny drove away, and Scotty went down to the stable with the two horses. Quickly Kimball told Dell Burke about the robbery.

"Got a roll of fifteen hundred from me, and my wife's diamonds, which can't be replaced for five thousand. This is a hell of a country. Thirty thousand dollars worth of horses, fifteen hundred in cash and five thousand dollars worth of diamonds. I've appealed to the Cattlemen's Association and to the sheriff's office; and now I'm here. If they can't stop it, I will."

"That's fine," replied Dell soberly. "I've got more bad news."

"More?" gasped Kimball. "What happened?"

"It was the sheriff's idea. Remember those twelve two-year-old sorrels—the ones you figured on sellin' to somebody in Chicago? Well, we took six of 'em and put 'em in a corral down at Runnin' Deer Flat. The sheriff, deputy and me laid out there two nights, usin' them six horses as bait."

"I see," nodded Kimball. "What happened?"

"Durin' the second night, somebody came here at the ranch, and stole the other six."

"Who was here at the home ranch that night?"

"Scotty McKenzie, George Ryder, Hap Harris and Cloudy Knight."

"George Ryder and Hap Harris, eh? New men?"

"Been here six months. Ed Holt left here and went north. I fired Bob Crosby, and I don't know where he went. George and Hap are good bronc riders, and know horses. I'm shore sorry about that hold-up. Did yuh get a good look at the two men?"

"Behind a couple of Winchesters," growled Kimball. "Both had masks over their heads. A description would probably fit any two men in the valley."

"I suppose that's true. Well, we better go in and see how Cloudy is comin' along, Mr. Kimball."

"I want you to meet the family," said Kimball. "This is the first time either of

them have ever been on a ranch. I'm afraid their introduction has not been any too pleasant."

"I'll shore do all I can to make it pleasant," smiled Dell.

IV

SAD and Swede left Dry Wells an hour ahead of the stage that morning. Sad had made some inquiries about the different ranches in the Lost Horse Valley, and had been told that Eph Walker owned the Thirty-three spread, which was but a short distance south of Bear Paw City. Walker was about sixty years of age, with a weather-beaten face, stubby mustache, and cobalt-blue eyes, almost hidden in a network of fine wrinkles. He was working at the



corral, but stopped as they rode up to him.

"Howdy, gents," he said, smiling pleasantly. Sad swung from his saddle and walked up to Walker.

"I wondered if it was the same Walker," he laughed, holding out his hand. "Yuh don't remember me, do yuh?"

"Well, there's somethin' familiar about yuh, at that, stranger."

"Remember bein' up in the Sundown country, buyin' horses, about seven years ago."

"Why—uh—Sontag! That's it—Sad Sontag. Well, well!"

Swede had dismounted. Now that Walker remembered Sad, he surely remembered Swede, who had been Sad's partner at the time Walker bought the horses.

"What brought you boys 'way down here?" asked Walker. "Yo're both lookin' fine, too."

"Oh, we just drifted in," laughed Sad. "We've been breakin' horses for the Stovall outfit, down at Piperock Springs. Came up to Dry Wells, and heard a lot of talk about Lost Horse Valley. Saw a man killed in Dry Wells last night."

"Who was he?"

"Arizona Ames."

"The devil! Who shot him?"

"Nobody knows. Bushed from across the street. You knew him?"

"I should say I did. Known him for years. He worked for the K Bar K."

"Do you know Lucius Kimball?"

"No-o-o-o," drawled the old man, "I don't. Kimball ain't the kind yuh get to know. He's just a rich man, usin' fancy horses as a means to spend money."

"He came in on the stage this mornin', I think," said Sad. "Him and his wife and daughter."

"He did, eh? Ain't been here for almost a year. Leaves everythin' to Dell Burke. But I ain't surprised he's here. Kimball thought he was immune from horse-stealin'. They tell me he's been hit hard. Burke was over here a couple days ago, and he said that somebody had stole thirty-six head from them in less than six weeks—all blooded stuff."

"Where on earth does all that stolen stuff go?" asked Sad.

"It—it just evaporates, Sontag. Let's put up them horses, and go up to the house."

"Oh, we can't stay," said Sad quickly. "We'll go along to Bear Paw City."

"Got to meet a man there on important business?" asked Walker, a twinkle in his blue eyes.

"Well, no, but——"

"Then yo're stoppin' right here, boys. I'll show yuh where the oat bin is located, and where to hang yore saddles. I notice, yo're packin' yore rifles right along with yuh."

"Habit, I reckon," smiled Sad. "We

didn't want to sell 'em; so we pack 'em along."

"We carry everythin' we own," laughed Swede. "All we have to do is hang up our hats—and we're home."

THEY stabled their horses and went up to the house, where they met Mrs. Walker, a little gray-haired lady. Eph Walker explained who the boys were, and that they had tried to go on to Bear Paw City.

"Well, I should say not!" exclaimed Mrs. Walker. "The idea of you boys wanting to do a thing like that."

"We shore don't want to impose on yuh," replied Sad.

"Impose! Friends never impose."

"That's mighty nice of yuh, Mrs. Walker."

"Call her 'Ma,'" said Eph Walker. "Everybody does."

"Lord, yes," laughed Mrs. Walker. "Nobody ever calls me Mrs."

"Gosh!" exclaimed Swede. "I feel like I've just come home."

"We want folks to feel that way," smiled Ma Walker.

"Ma," said Eph, "somebody shot and killed Arizony Ames, down at Dry Wells last night."

"Shot and killed Arizony?" The old lady gasped in amazement. "Why, what on earth is this country comin' to, Eph?"

"I may be all wrong," said Sad, "but my hunch is that Arizona was down there to meet Lucius Kimball—to tell him somethin' that somebody didn't want told."

"I believe Arizony was as honest as a dollar," declared Walker. "He got drunk and fought anybody who wanted a fight, but I'd bank on his honesty. I shore wish he'd lived to talk with Kimball—it might have helped us a lot."

"Tell us somethin' about this horse stealin'," said Swede.

"Well, there ain't much to tell, Harri-gan. About a year ago we began losin' horses—us and the Bar S. Swan River Simpson owns the Bar S. At first we

just lost a few—kinda dribbled away. Later, they disappeared in small bunches. We done everythin' possible to find out where they were goin', but it wasn't no use. Durin' the past year I've lost over a hundred head, and Swan River swears he's lost more than that.

"Somehow, the K Bar K didn't lose any. It didn't seem possible, 'cause the K Bar K stock was mighty valuable stuff. But we figured it might be hard for them to get rid of blooded stuff. Swan River swore that Kimball—well, he had an idea that the K Bar K was behind it, tryin' to put us two outfits out of business.

"And then, just a few weeks ago, they hit the K Bar K. Dell Burke was as wild as a hawk. He got the sheriff in here, and was raisin' the devil over it. I heard they tried to bait a trap down at Runnin' Deer Flats, and while they was watchin' the trap, the thieves went to the home ranch and took six fancy horses. I reckon that's why Kimball came here today."

"What kind of a feller is the sheriff?" asked Sad.

"Bill Tilton? Bill's all right. He's never caught a criminal yet; but he's hopeful. He's got Zibe Underwood for a deputy, which don't mean a thing. Sort of a case of blind leadin' the blind. But they're both honest—and that's a lot in this country."

"Well, it's mighty queer," mused Sad. "When yuh steal a horse, you've got to dispose of him. Yuh can't just bury 'em, and wait until folks forget 'em. They've got to be fed and watered, yuh know—and even thirty-six horses take up a lot of room."

"I realize that," sighed Eph Walker. "It's spooky as the devil."

"Interestin'," said Sad thoughtfully. Eph Walker looked sideways at Sad's lean face.

"I'm interested about a hundred head," he stated quietly.

"How many have the Bar S lost?" asked Sad.

"As many as I have. Swan River Simp-

son is about broke. Ma, ain't it almost supper time?"

"I'm going in and stir up some biscuits right now, Eph," replied Ma Walker, putting her sewing aside. "You boys talk about ghosts, until I ring the bell."

"Why don't yuh ask the Cattlemen's Association for help?" asked Swede.

"We did. They sent a detective, and he fussed around here for two weeks. Then he got an unsigned letter, tellin' him to get to hell out of Lost Horse Valley before they drilled him full of holes."

"And he went?"

"On the next stage," smiled the old man.

"Well, that's better," said Sad cheerfully. "Ghosts don't write letters to detectives. Anyway, a ghost wouldn't care how many detectives was around. But with all this wholesale stealin', ain't there anybody you've suspected?"

"Not a soul. Every sheriff in Wyomin' and Montana has been instructed to watch for Thirty-three and Bar S horses. It don't seem possible for anybody to market them."

"And now they're stealin' K Bar K, eh? I wonder why they didn't take any before? That's worth thinkin' about."

"Keep on thinkin', Sontag," replied the old man.

"Yeah, and we'd prob'ly think better, if we washed our faces," laughed Swede. "Anyway, we'd think cleaner."

Young Jack Walker rode in before dinner. He was twenty, blond, and good-looking. Jack had heard about the hold-up, and was excited about it.

"Didja see the Kimball girl?" queried Swede.

"Gee, I shore did!" exclaimed Jack. "I heard her talkin' about the hold-up, and she thought it was fun. Puggy Jones said she wasn't half as scared as he was. She's a dinger."

"You better forget the Kimball girl—and wash your face," said Ma Walker severely. "She's worth millions."

"I'd tell a man," agreed Jack sincerely.

V

THE sheriff's office in Dry Wells received word of the hold-up, and early next morning Bill Tilton and Zibe Underwood came to Lost Horse Valley. Sad, Swede and Jack had gone to Bear Paw City, when the two officers rode in at the Thirty-three ranch.

Eph Walker was working at the stable, and the two officers sat down in the doorway to talk with him about the hold-up. The sheriff noticed the two rifles, in scabbards, leaning against the wall.

"Oh, them," said Eph Walker. "They belong to Sontag and Harrigan."

"Clear as mud," said the sheriff gravely. "I never heard of 'em, Eph."

Eph Walker explained who Sad and Swede were.

"Oh, yea-a-a-ah," drawled the sheriff. "Zibe, them are the two punchers who seen Arizony Ames git shot. They must have left town ahead of the stage. Uh-hu-u-uh!"

"Why that 'uh-hu-u-u-uh'?" asked Eph Walker.

"Oh, nothin'," parried the sheriff, squinting at the rifles.

"Wait a minute, now," said Eph quietly. "You ain't tryin' to connect them two boys with that hold-up?"

The sheriff cuffed his hat over one eye and scratched the back of his neck violently.

"Them hold-up men had rifles," he said slowly. "There ain't many men, ridin' with rifles around here. And they left *ahead* of the stage."

"Pshaw!" snorted Walker. "I know them two boys, Bill."

"You knowed 'em seven years ago, yuh mean, Eph; and you wasn't with 'em yesterday—not along the road between here and Dry Wells."

"That's true, Bill."

"Well," the sheriff got to his feet, "I reckon we'll stumble on, Eph. If yuh don't mind, I'll take them two guns along."

"Wait a minute, Bill."

Eph Walker got slowly to his feet, rack-

ing his brain for a reason why Sad and Swede should not be arrested. Down in his heart, he felt sure that neither of these two cowboys were guilty, and those two rifles were the only evidence, except for the fact that they rode out of Dry Wells ahead of the stage.

"Was you thinkin' of somethin'?" asked the sheriff, as he picked up one of the rifles.

"Well, yeah, I was, Bill," nodded the old man. "As a matter of fact, Sontag and Harrigan was sent in here by the Cattle-men's Association. And yuh know damn well the association don't hire crooks. I didn't want to say anythin'—but—well, the information is safe with you."

Slowly the sheriff leaned the rifle against the wall and came to the doorway.

"Well, that's a hoss of another color, Eph," he said. "I'm glad yuh told me. I'd hate to arrest an Association detective. Zibe, I reckon me and you will have to look further."

"Uh-huh," nodded Zibe. "It looked *too* easy, Bill. If they'd have held up that stage with rifles, they'd shore ditched them rifles before showin' up here."

"I was thinkin' that m'self," nodded the sheriff.

"I guess I'll quit thinkin'," sighed Zibe. "All it'll never do for me is to bring on a complete nervous breakdown."

"Yeah!" snorted the sheriff. "If you wait for yore head to affect yuh, Zibe, you'll be hale and hearty at a hundred. Well, we'll see yuh later, Eph. So-long."

"And now," sighed Eph Walker, as he watched them ride away, "I've jeopardized my immortal soul. Lyin' old fool. Dang it, if I could only see them two boys before Bill Tilton does. But I can't. Guess I'll go up and tell Ma that Old Man Ananias is here in person."

BEAR PAW CITY was a typical cow-town, with one crooked street bordered with unpainted, wooden buildings. The Grizzly Saloon was the biggest building in the town, and usually the busiest.

People looked curiously at Sad and Swede. Not many strangers came to Bear Paw City.

Sad, Swede and Jack Walker were sitting in front of the Grizzly Saloon when a man rode in, tied his horse, and came across the street. He was nearly seven feet tall, very thin and bony, with a long face, decorated with a fierce mustache. His sombrero was tall of crown, narrow of brim, and about one size too small.

His garb was typical of the cowboy, except that he wore a white vest, decorated with pink rosebuds, and instead of boots, he wore gaiter shoes, to which he had attached a pair of huge, Mexican spurs, decorated profusely with silver.

"That's Swan River Simpson, owner of the Bar S spread," whispered Jack. "His hay-fever must be all right, 'cause he ain't got his hat tied down."

With a slow, measured tread, the tall man came over to them.

"Greetings, Jack," he said solemnly.

"Hello, Mr. Simpson," smiled Jack. "I want you to meet Sontag and Harrigan, two of dad's old friends."

"And not so damned old, either," observed Swan River. "Gents, I'm pleased to meet any friend of Eph Walker. I shore am. Jack, I hear that Mr. Million Dollar Kimball packed a big wad of money once too often."

"He sure did," grinned Jack. "And they took Mrs. Kimball's diamonds, too; worth five thousand dollars—or more."

"No! Is that so? Well, mebbe I better find a nice, quiet spot, where I can cry a little about it. I'm shore all broke up over it."

Swan River was as sober as a minister; not even a twinkle in his eyes.

"Yuh ought to git some black cloth, tie it in a bow, and nail it on yore front door," said Swede.

"Young man," said Swan River solemnly, "I beg of yuh to not show undue levity in this case. If the King was dead, we could yell, 'The King is dead'—and he wouldn't hear it. But we can't go yellin'

'The King got robbed of five thousand dollars! Long live the robbers!' No, yuh can't do that. Uh-hu-u-uh! Here comes the law. Well, Bill and Zibe ain't more than twenty-four hours late. The boys are improvin'."

"Have yuh lost any more horses, Swan River?" asked Jack.

"Lost any more? Young man, the only horse I'm sure of is the one I hooked a saddle onto this mornin'."

"Haven't you men got any suspects at all?" asked Sad.

"Plenty—plenty. I suspect everybody, except myself, Sontag. And I'm gettin'



so danged absent-minded that I'm beginnin' to wonder about me. Well, I'm pleased to meetcha, gents. Yuh don't happen to want to buy a ranch, do yuh?"

"Horse ranch?" asked Swede.

"Well, yuh might use it for horses—temporarily."

AS THE sheriff and deputy rode up to the saloon, Lucius Kimball and Dell Burke came to town in the ranch buckboard.

"Hyah, Swan River," called the sheriff cordially.

"Purty good," drawled Swan River. "Step down and I'll buy yuh a drink. Or is there a law against an officer drinkin', while he's on the trail of robbers?"

Before the sheriff could reply, the buckboard drew up near them, and Lucius Kimball said:

"You finally got here, did you, Sheriff?"

"Yeah, I reckon I did," admitted the sheriff.

"It is exactly twenty-four hours since I was robbed," declared Kimball warmly. "Some day I hope to see enough efficiency in this county to stamp out horse stealing and stage robbery. It is getting so that it isn't safe for honest folks to be abroad."

"Abroad," said Zibe. "I kinda like that word."

"I suppose you think that sarcasm covers inefficiency."

"Take it easy," warned the sheriff. "Don't argue, Zibe."

"Kimball," said Swan River, "it's too danged bad that Eph Walker ain't here, so all three of us could hop onto the officers. Please don't forget that you ain't the only loser around here."

"I am not interested in the troubles of you and Eph Walker," replied Kimball.

"I know it," sighed Swan River. "You think you've got enough money to play a lone hand. I dunno how yuh kept 'em from liftin' yore horses as long as yuh did; but they're makin' up for lost time. No, you wasn't interested, as long as it was only me and Eph Walker who was bein' nicked. You never hopped onto the sheriff for not findin' the horse thieves, who were takin' *our* stock. Now that they're handin' you the sharp end of the stick, we're not interested."

"I'll remember that, Simpson!" snapped Kimball.

"I doubt it," replied Swan River quietly. "Yo're too busy thinkin' what a little tin god Lucius Kimball is to remember anythin'."

Swan River turned on his heel and went into the saloon, leaving Kimball, red-faced with anger, glaring after him.

"Mr. Kimball, if you can give me a description of the two men, who held—" began the sheriff.

"Description—hell!" snapped Kimball.

"They—they had rifles?"

"No—walking-sticks!" snapped Kimball angrily. "Drive over to the store, Dell."

Dell Burke swung the team around, and stopped across the street.

"Mebbe that's all they did have," said

Zibe. "I'll betcha I could stick *him* up with a broomstick."

"Aw, hell, I reckon he's sore," sighed the sheriff. He turned his head and saw Dell Burke motioning to him.

KIMBALL and Burke had stopped at the entrance to a general store, where the sheriff joined them.

"What do you know about those two strange cowboys?" asked Kimball.

"In what way?" queried the sheriff.

"Did they come in *ahead* of the stage yesterday?"

"Yeah, I believe they did."

"I see-e-e. It might be worth while to investigate them."

"I did."

"You did, eh? And what did you find out, if I may ask?"

"I don't mind tellin' you, Mr. Kimball; these two men are from the Cattlemen's Association."

"Indeed! How did you find this out?"

"Eph Walker told me. He didn't say, but I figure he sent for 'em."

"That's different," said Kimball, and walked away with Burke.

The sheriff went back to the saloon, where he found Swan River, Sad, Swede and Jack Walker. Swan River was saying:

"What could Kimball expect? Everybody knows he packs a big roll of money in his pocket. He likes to make a flash. Mebbe he made a flash in Dry Wells, 'cause nobody in the valley knew he was comin'."

The sheriff looked thoughtfully at Sad and Swede, wondering if, by any chance, Eph Walker could be mistaken. And even if Walker was not mistaken—the Association didn't pay very big wages.

"That's what makes me wonder," said Zibe. "It must have been two fellers from Dry Wells."

"Two fellers with rifles—who knew Kimball would be on the stage. That treasure box never carries any money."

Sad turned his head slowly and looked at the sheriff.

"Me and Swede left Dry Wells ahead of the stage, Sheriff," he said slowly, "and we both had rifles."

"Yeah—I—I know," replied the confused sheriff.

"We seen yore rifles at the Thirty-three," explained Zibe.

"And—and we talked with Eph Walker," added the sheriff. "It's all right."

"That's fine," said Sad, wondering how it was all right.

Dell Burke came in, grinned widely and came up to the bar.

"Has Kimball been ridin' you, Dell?" asked the sheriff.

"That damn fool!" snorted Dell softly. "He's been yellin' orders ever since he hit the ranch. Didn't tell us he was comin'. Kinda caught Cloudy Knight with a dirty house, and tried to fire him. He's kicked about everythin'."

"He don't think much of me," said the sheriff.

"He don't care much about anythin', except his money. His wife and daughter are out at the ranch, and Cloudy is havin' a hell of a time, tryin' to cook things to please 'em. The girl is pretty and got plenty sabe; but the Old Lady—whooee-e-e! She's shore high-toned on her feed. Me and Scotty caught Cloudy down by the stable, with a thirty-thirty in his hands, lookin' through a corral fence at some young stock. I said, 'Cloudy, what in hell are you doin'?' and he says, 'Honest t' Gawd, Dell, I'm obeyin' orders. Lady Frozen-Face insists on havin' filly for supper—and I don't know which one to kill first.'"

"A horse-eater, eh?" queried Zibe.

"Nope. I asked the girl about it, and she cried. She says there's some part of a beef critter that's called fillay."

"I've et lots of it," said Zibe.

"Yuh have?" queried Dell. "Where do yuh find it?"

"I dunno where it is. But I've et so many cows in my time that I *must* have et the fillay."

"Yeah, I reckon that's right. Well, I

better go back and join the boss, before he gets mad at me again."

Sad, Swede and Jack rode back to the ranch, where Sad took Eph Walker aside, telling him what the sheriff had said about the rifles.

"Well, mebbe I'm an old fool, Sontag," said Walker. "They were goin' to arrest you two fellers for that robbery. I had to think mighty fast right then; so I said you two had been sent in here by the Association. I didn't think yuh pulled that job; so I lied about yuh."

"Well, that was pretty nice of yuh, Mr. Walker. No, we didn't pull that job; but we'd have a devil of a time provin' we didn't. We never met a soul on the road. This was the first place we stopped."

"I hope Bill Tilton don't send a telegram to the Association."

"Yeah, that would be bad," replied Sad thoughtfully.

VI

CLOUDY KNIGHT pawed the last of the beans off the table-top into a kettle, and reached for the water bucket.

"Yes'm, it's shore romantic," he declared. "I never git tired of separatin' rocks from beans thataway."

"I mean that the cattle business is romantic," explained Lorna Kimball.

"Oh, shore." The K Bar K cook placed the kettle on the stove and wiped his hands on his flour-sack apron. "Yeah, I'd say it's about the most romantic thing I ever seen."

"The cowboys are so rough-and-ready," sighed the girl.

"Ready to sleep in the shade," nodded Cloudy. "Yeah, and I'll admit they're rough. I reckon the Lord made 'em forked, so they could set in a saddle, but He never figured that they ort to have brains."

"Cloudy, you are a very quaint person," laughed Lorna.

"Quaint? Huh! Well, I hope it means well. How's yore paw today?"

"Dad is all right."

"That's re-markable," said Cloudy. Scotty McKenzie and George Ryder, two of the cowboys, came up to the kitchen doorway.

"Where-at is the dinner?" queried Scotty. "It's past twelve."

"There's a couple romancers for yuh," sighed Cloudy. "Rough and ready—to eat. Go on back to yore holes, you two prairie-dogs, and wait for the bell."

Lucius Kimball came from the dining-room.

"What's all the argument about?" he asked coldly.

"So yo're back here again, eh?" observed Cloudy. "Movin' in on me from every side, eh? Well, well!" Cloudy reached across the stove and picked up a heavy skillet.

"This here kitchen is my Alamo," he declared, "and I'm goin' to defend it. Scotty, you and George git away from that doorway, before I brain both of yuh. Kimball, you fade out. Mebby you own this danged K Bar K outfit, but my kitchen and my soul belong to Cloudy Knight."

"All right!" snapped Kimball. "But it might interest you to know that I'm lookin' for a new chef."

"A new what?"

"A new cook."

"Dad, I think Cloudy is a marvelous cook," said Lorna.

"I won't be fired out of my own kitchen," declared Kimball.

"Neither will I," declared Cloudy quickly. "Tighten up yore belt, feller; we'll make it the survival of the fittest."

"Here comes the law," notified Scotty McKenzie. Kimball stepped outside, as the sheriff and deputy rode up to the house. Cloudy stepped to the kitchen doorway, and the two cowboys ducked aside.

"I've been doin' a lot of thinkin', Mr. Kimball," said the sheriff.

"Wonders will never cease," declared Cloudy. The sheriff glared at the old cook, who chuckled gleefully, as he exchanged

winks with Zibe Underwood, the deputy.

"It's about them two strangers—Sontag and Harrigan," resumed the sheriff.

"Yes?" prompted Kimball.

"Well, I ain't exactly satisfied. I'm leavin' Zibe here to kinda keep an eye on 'em, and I'm goin' to Dry Wells, where I'll send a telegram to the Association, askin' 'em if Sontag and Harrigan are workin' on a case here for them. How's that?"

"It's perfectly all right with me," replied Kimball. "It seems to be the natural thing to do."

"Well, I'll do it. We're doin' everythin' we can to try and recover yore wife's diamonds, Mr. Kimball. Except for a few tin-horn gamblers, I reckon yore wife's the only one who owned any diamonds around here. Ain't many of us care anythin' for flashy stuff thataway."

"I imagine not," nodded Kimball dryly. He turned his head and saw Lorna in the kitchen doorway, shaking with mirth. Cloudy was there, too, but very solemn.

"Women like flashy stuff," said Cloudy. "I knowed a feller oncet, who got married, and every year his wife asked him for a three-carat diamond ring."

"What'd she do with all of 'em?" asked the sheriff.

"That's easy to figure out, Bill; she never got any."

"Oh!" said the sheriff. "Well, I'll be goin' along. Just as soon as I've got some trace of them diamonds, I'll drop in, Mr. Kimball."

"Well," sighed Cloudy, with a note of finality, "that's the last we'll ever see of Bill Tilton, sheriff of Lost Horse Valley. Goodby, Bill, take keer of yourself."

CLOUDY walked back into the kitchen, where Lorna sat on the edge of a table, watching him get the meal.

"Cloudy, who do you suppose killed Arizona Ames?" she asked.

"I wish I knew," replied Cloudy. "I didn't even know that Arizony was quittin' the outfit, until Dell Burke told me that Arizony had done quit, and pulled out.

Dell loaned him a horse to ride to Dry Wells."

"Dell is a fine fellow, isn't he?" asked Lorna. "He really is a handsome man."

Cloudy looked narrowly at her. "Yeah, he's all right."

"You and Arizona Ames were very good friends, I understand."

"Me and him was jist like that," replied the cook, holding up two fingers, held tightly together.

"Then why didn't he tell you he was going away, Cloudy?"

"Well, I—huh! That's an idea, too. Why didn't he? I dunno why."

"I can tell you something else, Cloudy," said Lorna.

"Yo're just plumb loaded t'day, ain't yuh?" grinned the cook.

"Uh-hu-u-u-uh," drawled Lorna. "I heard dad telling mother that the two men who saw Arizona shot in Dry Wells, were detectives, sent in here to apprehend criminals."

"Yea-a-ah? Well, that's fine. We had a detective in here a while ago, but he got scared out."

"He did? Cloudy, you don't believe in ghosts, do you?"

"You better git out of this kitchen, before yuh git beef-steak smoke in yore hair," laughed Cloudy.

VII

ZIBE UNDERWOOD left the K Bar K, rode through Bear Paw City, and went out to the Thirty-three, where he found Sad, Swede and Eph Walker, taking their ease on the ranch-house porch. He dismounted and joined them.

"Where's Bill?" asked Walker.

"Oh, he's gone back to Dry Wells," replied Zibe. "He left me here to kinda keep an eye on things."

"Have yuh got yore eye on somethin'?" asked Swede.

"Yeah," nodded Zibe. "As a matter of fact, I was left here to keep an eye on you

two fellers, while Bill sends a telegram to the Cattlemen's Association."

Eph Walker swallowed painfully and looked away. Swede stopped in the act of rolling a cigarette, sifted out the tobacco and began chewing the cigarette-paper. Sad grinned behind his hand. Even the danger of arrest failed to curb his sense of humor.

"I don't reckon Bill Tilton thinks yuh lied, Eph," said the deputy. "He jist ain't so damn sure that even a detective don't



take some easy money, when he gits a good chance—like that'n was."

"Well, we won't worry about that part of it," said Sad. "What's yore opinion on this horse stealin', Zibe?"

"If I had any opinions, I've done forgot 'em," replied Zibe. "Yuh can't steal horses, without disposin' of 'em. There ain't never been a man missin' off'n this range long enough to dispose of horses."

"That's what I've heard," mused Sad. "I also heard that yuh had a detective in here, and they warned him away."

"I reckon they scared him out," nodded the deputy.

"I'd hate that," stated Swede. "It'd shore be embarrassin' to get letters from a strange horse-thief. Most of 'em can't even spell good."

"Yeah," agreed Zibe, "but I'd rather get a letter than a bullet."

"Yuh don't suppose they'd shoot, do yuh?"

"They told him they would," grinned Zibe. "He didn't wait to see."

"In that case," said Swede, "the best thing for me and Sad to do is to saddle up and git out of here."

"No, I don't want yuh to do that. I'm kinda responsible for yuh."

"But just suppose we *went anyway?*"

"Don't git in a hurry, boys. For gosh sakes, wait until yuh git a letter, anyway."

"I reckon we'll do that, Zibe," grinned Sad.

"That's fine, and I shore appreciate it," Zibe sighed with relief.

"Put up yore horse and stay for supper," invited Eph Walker.

"I'm half-way to the stable right now!" exclaimed Zibe. "I've done et Ma Walker's biscuits before."

BILL TILTON, the sheriff, lost no time in sending a telegram to the secretary of the Association. His wire read:

ARE SONTAG AND HARRIGAN WORKING ON
A CASE FOR YOU IN LOST HORSE VALLEY.

It was too late to get a reply that evening, but one came early next morning, from the secretary. It read:

I HOPE SO.

"Another the'ry all shot to hell!" snorted the sheriff disgustedly, and went to saddle his horse, preparatory to riding back to Bear Paw City.

But while he was saddling, a little ray of sunshine, in the person of Dug Sales, a small rancher, came into his life. Sales' ranch was off the Dry Wells-Bear Paw City road about two miles, and about six miles from Bear Paw City.

"I dunno if this is worth anythin' to yuh, or not, Sheriff," stated Sales, "but early the mornin' of the stage hold-up, I seen Jack Walker and Bunk Barnhardt, of the Bar S, ride past my place—and they had rifles."

"Well, that's interestin'," admitted the sheriff. "You was close enough to identify 'em, Dug?"

"Hell, yeah! I spoke to 'em. Said they was out early, lookin' for a deer."

"Uh-huh—they did, eh? Well, you keep this to yourself, Dug."

"'F there's any reward——" suggested Dug.

"I reckon Kimball'd pay well to git them

diamonds back. You leave it to me, Dug. Much obliged to yuh."

The sheriff rode in at the Walker ranch shortly after noon, and found Eph Walker at the corral, gentling a yearling colt.

"Well, I reckon you was right, Eph," said the sheriff. "I got a telegram from the Association, sayin' that Sontag and Harrigan are on this case."

Eph Walker stared at him in amazement for a moment.

"Oh, yeah—well, that's fine, Bill. Glad to hear it."

"Where's Jack?" asked the sheriff.

"Jack went to town with Sontag and Harrigan."

"Uh-huh. Eph, where was Jack at the time that stage hold-up was pulled?"

"Where was he? Why, lemme see-e-e. Oh, yeah. Him and Bunk Barnhardt went out early that mornin' to try and git a deer. Jack stayed all night at the Bar S; so that him and Bunk could—sa-a-y! What's this all about, Bill?"

"Did they get any deer?" queried the sheriff.

"I don't reckon they did. Jack never said anythin' about it. Him and Bunk often go. But wait a minute, Bill. What's this all about?"

"Uh-huh," grunted the sheriff thoughtfully. Eph Walker looked anxiously at him.

"Bill, you ain't insinuat'in' that Jack and Bunk——"

"I'm just askin', Eph."

"Wait a minute. Jack was in Bear Paw City, when the stage got in that mornin'."

"That'd be easy to do—cuttin' across the hills. Where's his rifle?"

"Why, he borrowed one from Bunk, and I reckon Bunk took it back to the Bar S. Jack's rifle has got a busted firin'-pin."

"Uh-huh. Well, I'll be moseyin' along, Eph."

"Now, Bill," persisted the old man, "you know blamed well that Jack and Bunk never had any hand in that holdup."

"I shore *hope* they didn't, Eph. But

I'm here to run down criminals—no matter who it hurts. I'll see yuh later."

VIII

BUNK BARNHARDT and Whizzer Jackson, Swan River Simpson's two cowboys, stood against the Grizzly bar, apparently dejected, and undeniably drunk. Whizzer looked owlishly at the bartender, as he declared:

"Thish is goin' to be har' winter, y'betcha. Shing, Bunk."

And Bunk Barnhardt lifted his head, opened his mouth widely, and their voices blended mournfully, if not harmoniously:

*"Out in thish wide worl' alone,
Nothin' but sorrow I shee-e-e.
I am nobody's da-a-a-rlin',
Nobody ca-a-ares for me-e-e-e."*

"And tha's true," declared Bunk tearfully. "No job, no money."

"Get fired?" asked Sad.

"Thieved out," replied Whizzer. "No horshe—no job. Schwan River ain't got 'nough horshe left to ride alone on. We're all through and tied up for shipment. Wanna hear us shing, 'Jus' Break th' News t' Mother'? I'll betcha fo'-bits we can make all of yuh cry."

"I can cry, jus' thinkin' of it," declared Bunk tearfully.

"Who the hell wants to cry?" asked the bartender. "Personally, I don't think you can sing for sour apples."

"That," declared Bunk soberly, "is an insult to music."

"I'd rather insult it than see it murdered," replied the drink dispenser.

"All right," said Bunk. "You'll be damn awful old and have whiskers to yore knees, before I ever shing for you again."

Lucius Kimball and Dell Burke were beside a feed corral in Bear Paw City, when the sheriff rode in from the Thirty-three. There were possibly twenty-five horses in the corral, all bearing the Bar S brand. The sheriff rode up and dismounted.

"We're just lookin' over some of Swan River's horses," explained Dell Burke. "He wants to sell the bunch. Says they're all he's got left."

The sheriff peered through the bars, moving in close to Burke.

"I've found out somethin'," he told them quietly. "On the mornin' of the stage robbery, Jack Walker and Bunk Barnhardt was seen down near Sales' place—with rifles. Eph Walker says they went huntin' that mornin'."

"That might be worth investigatin'," said Kimball.

"Investigatin'—hell! I'm goin' to arrest 'em."

"You can't arrest a man for carryin' a rifle," said Burke. "You better get more evidence than that."

"I'll arrest 'em first—and get evidence later."

"Go ahead," smiled Burke. "I don't believe the law will back yuh in that kinda stuff."

"Here's an idea," suggested Kimball. "Both of the men are in the Grizzly Saloon. We'll all go up there, and you merely make some inquiries. Don't accuse them outright. Let them prove an alibi."

"Well—all right," agreed the sheriff dubiously. "C'mon."

At the saloon the boys were laughing over some clever horse-play. That is, they were all laughing, except Zibe Underwood, who was picking up some loose change, some keys, a few buttons and a pocket-knife. Then he picked up his gun and his hat.

"That was a damn good trick," he agreed, panting a little. "It shore was unexpected."

"We done it to Swan River," said Bunk, "but he's so damn long that his head hit the floor—and we camped out two days."

"Here comes the sheriff and Kimball!" exclaimed Zibe. "Try it on Bill, will yuh?"

"Thish trick is good any ol' time," declared Whizzer. "Bring 's a victim."

The three men came in, with the sheriff in the lead.

"Boys, howdy," greeted the sheriff jovially. "Nice mornin'."

"Not bad thish af'ernoon," replied Whizzer. "Have drink, Willyum?"

"Well, I don't mind 'f I do, Whizzer."

"Right up here, ol' Officer 'f the Law."

The unsuspecting sheriff stepped between Whizzer and Bunk, who acted swiftly. Each man grabbed a sleeve and a pants-leg. With a heave, they swung the sheriff off his feet, and upended him, shaking him violently, which sifted everything out of the sheriff's pockets. His gun fell from its holster, and even some cartridges spilled from loose loops in his belt. Then they whirled him over and stood him on his feet, red-faced, dizzy and thoroughly upset.

The sheriff grasped the bar with both hands, while Whizzer and Bunk went into paroxysms of unholy mirth. But there was no mirth on the faces of Sad Sontag, Lucius Kimball and Dell Burke. Among the loose articles which fell from the pockets of Bill Tilton, one thing sparkled and flashed on the rough, wooden floor.

Kimball moved in slowly and picked it up, his face grave. It was a platinum ring, set with a large diamond and two rubies. Sad looked keenly at it, as Kimball turned it over in his hand.

"One of yore wife's rings?" asked Sad.

"One I gave her a year ago," replied Kimball quietly.

"And it was in Bill's pocket," marveled Zibe. "Why, Bill!"

"Huh!" grunted the sheriff, still upset.

"What was in my pocket?"

"One of them stolen diamond rings."

"It was not!"

"I seen it fall out. We all seen it, Bill."

"Well, my Gawd!" gasped the sheriff, staring at the ring. "Where do yuh suppose I picked that up?"

"Suppose you tell us," suggested Kimball dryly.

"Didja ever see such hair on a dog?" queried Jack Walker.

"I know!" yelped the sheriff. "I know now. Here!"

He reached in his pocket and yanked

out a pair of handcuffs, which he tossed to Zibe. "Put 'em on Jack Walker. You!" He whirled and jabbed the muzzle of his gun against Bunk Barnhardt's ribs. "You dropped that ring, when yuh upset me. Tryin' to pile the deadwood on me, eh? Hold still, or I'll blast yuh plenty. There!"

He clicked on the handcuffs and stepped back, wiping his brow with his left sleeve.

"I reckon there's yore evidence, Kimball," he said triumphantly.

"What's this all about?" demanded Jack Walker hotly.

"I've arrested you two for robbin' the stage," panted the sheriff. "You was seen near there, early in the mornin', packin' rifles."

"You damn fool, we never done it!" rasped Bunk indignantly.

"Yo're the fool," retorted the sheriff. "Didja accidentally drop that ring, or was yuh tryin' to put the deadwood onto me?"

"Listen to me," begged Jack Walker. "I was here in town, when the stage came in that mornin'."

"All right, Smarty," replied the sheriff. "I waited for the stage today, right at the spot that Puggy picked out as the place where the robbery was pulled. I told him to drive on at his normal gait, while I cut across the hills; and I beat him here by ten minutes. That's yore answer, young feller. The best thing you fellers can do is to tell us where yuh cached them diamonds."

"Let's turn the sheriff over and shake him some more," suggested Whizzer. "Yuh never can tell what we might shake loose."

PROTESTING bitterly, but to no avail, Jack and Bunk were put on their horses, and started for Dry Wells, with the sheriff and deputy. Sad drew Kimball aside and led him away from the crowd, which had assembled.

"What do you think about that deal?" asked Sad.

"It looks as though the sheriff was right," replied Kimball.

"Then you think Barnhardt accidentally dropped the ring?"

"I would hesitate to believe the sheriff had it in his pocket."

Sad shook his head slowly. "It wouldn't seem right. That is—unless a split had been made."

"You mean that the sheriff was paid for protection, Sontag?"

"Don't it seem kinda queer that horses vanish from here?" asked Sad. "This has been goin' on for over a year."

"Right!" said Kimball grimly. "I've lost—"

"I know," interrupted Sad. "But ain't it queer that they let yore stock alone all



that time—when you had the best horses in the whole valley, Kimball?"

"What's the answer, Sontag—if you have an answer?"

"I haven't an answer. But it looks to me as though they wasn't fixed to handle yore horses. Successful horse thieves have to be smart—or they don't last long. Unless I'm mistaken, they'll nick you again very soon; so yuh better be watchin'."

While Sad and Kimball were talking, two men rode into town, leading a string of five pack-horses, not packed. The men were bearded, hard-bitted, dusty and looked as though they came a long way. Instead of going to the Grizzly Saloon, they went directly to a general store.

"I wonder who they are," mused Sad, as he left Kimball and went slowly over to the store, where he found the proprietor talking with the two men.

"Mitchell, it's good to see you again," said the storekeeper.

"That's fine," replied one of the men gruffly. "Here's a bill of goods to fill out. We're pullin' out in the mornin' and we'll pack right here."

"That's fine. How's things up your way?"

"Pretty damn dry—but we can't kick. Cattle lookin' good."

"I'm glad to hear it. You boys don't happen to know what became of Bob Crosby, do you?"

"Shore," replied the other man. "Bob's up across the line, in Montana. Started a little brand of his own—the R Cross B. Ain't seen him for a long time, though."

"Well, a letter came for him quite a while ago, and I didn't know where to send it. What's his postoffice up there?"

"Hell, I dunno what it is. We'll take the letter along, and mebbe we'll be seein' him in a couple weeks—I dunno. Once in a while we see somebody from the Box 88, and that ain't far from Bob's place. We could send a letter up to him."

"That will be fine. I'll give it to you."

Sad sauntered outside and crossed the street. When the man came back with the letter, the man named Mitchell said:

"Who was that hombre who jist went out of here?"

"I've heard his name, but I can't recall it now. He just came here. Somebody said he was from the Cattlemen's Association."

"A cow detective, eh?" Both men laughed, and walked out.

Sad had no difficulty in finding out that Mitchell owned a small cattle outfit, fifty miles north of Bear Paw City; far out in the wilds, thirty miles from the Montana border. At regular intervals they came to Bear Paw City to outfit.

"Where does he market his beef?" asked Sad.

"I don't reckon he's marketed any yet," replied the informant.

EPH WALKER, coming to town, met the sheriff, deputy and their prisoners. But instead of going on to town, he went back to the ranch. The atmosphere was gloomy, when Sad and Swede returned. Ma Walker made a brave effort to be op-

timistic, but she was worried and frightened.

"Well, I'll tell yuh, Ma," said Sad, "I think the sheriff is all wrong. That ring ain't evidence. I'll swear it fell from the sheriff's pocket—and so will Swede. I believe Kimball thinks it did, too. A good lawyer would bust that case sky-high. The fact that Jack and Barnhardt were out that mornin', packin' rifles, don't mean a thing."

"I hope you are right," sighed Ma.

"Did the sheriff tell yuh he sent a telegram to the Association, Sad?" asked Eph Walker.

"No. Mebbe he was too upset. What about it?"

"Well, I reckon the answer was all right, because the sheriff was satisfied. He told me I was right."

Sad chuckled softly. "I'd like to know what was sent and received."

DO YUH a favor, eh?" Cloudy Knight looked narrowly at Lorna Kimball. "You hang around my kitchen, botherin' the devil out of me most of the time—and then yuh want favors done. What do yuh want this time—fresh strawberries?"

"Nothing to eat, Cloudy. There's a dance in Bear Paw City tomorrow night—and I want to go. Mother says no. Dad hasn't had a chance to decide, because I haven't told him. Mother says the men are too rough for me. Dell wants to take me." Cloudy scratched his stubbled chin thoughtfully.

"What's the favor?" he asked.

"I want you to tell dad what nice dances they have, and that I would be perfectly safe."

"In other words," said Cloudy, "you want me to lie; so you can git yore little feet walked on. I think yore maw is right."

"I want to have some fun," pouted the girl.

"Go down to the corral and saddle Tumbleweed. He'll throw yuh off and tromp hell out of yuh. It'll be good, clean fun—while it lasts."

"I guess Scotty was right," sighed Lorna.

"What's he right about?"

"He said you was narrow minded and had the soul of a badger."

"Oh, he did, eh? That—so he said that, eh? I'll feed him ground-glass, if it's the last thing I ever do. Soul of a badger!"

"He said you wouldn't help anybody."

"Oh, he did, eh? Wait'll next time he gits bogged down with whisky, and begs me for strong, black coffee. He'll git sheep-dip and iodine. And besides all that—he's a liar. Nobody ever asked me for help, and didn't git it."

"Just a word or two to dad," said Lorna quietly. "You'll know how to say it, Cloudy."

Cloudy shook his head wearily. "You'd corrupt the devil. Git along, and let me do the cookin'."

Kimball bought all of Swan River's horses, and brought them out to the ranch, where he placed them in a big corral. Dell Burke asked him about taking Lorna to the dance at Bear Paw City, and was very much surprised to have Kimball agree that it would be a good idea.

"I have a little scheme, Burke," confided Kimball. "That was one of the reasons I purchased those Bar S horses. I want you to send one of the boys to Dry Wells, with a message to the sheriff. Tomorrow night, while everyone else is at the dance, the sheriff and I will watch that herd. I have a feeling that someone else is interested in those horses. What do you think of the scheme?"

"We tried it once," replied Burke.

"I know you did. But this is different. They'll think that everyone is at the dance, leaving the herd unprotected."

"Yeah, it might work out, Mr. Kimball."

"You don't think so?"

"Well, it's worth tryin'. You can't lose anythin'—except sleep."

EPH and Ma Walker left early next morning, going to Dry Wells to see Jack. Sad and Swede insisted on washing the dishes, giving the old couple a chance

to get away earlier. While Sad finished the work in the kitchen, Swede took a broom and went into the main room, but was back in a minute, a small sheet of paper in his hand.

"Take a squint at this, will yuh?" he exclaimed. "It was on the rug, right by the door. Somebody shoved it under the door. Read it."

There was no name on it, nothing to indicate who it was for, nor who wrote it. It read:

WE'VE GOT YOU SPOTTED.

LOST HORSE VALLEY IS UN-
HEALTHY FOR ASSOCIATION
MEN. GET OUT—NOW!

"They must mean us," drawled Sad slowly. "It's shore funny they've got us spotted, when everybody in the valley thinks we're detectives from the association."

"Ghosts don't catch on so very quick, yuh know," said Swede. "But they come right up and poke their message from the dead right under yore door."

"I reckon I'll get me a ouija-board," said Sad gravely. "It'll save 'em a lot of trouble, if I could just sit down and talk with 'em any old time. I'd like to answer that message—in person."

They finished cleaning up things, saddled their horses and went to Bear Paw City. Mitchell and his cowboy were packing their animals in front of the store. Both of them were red-eyed from an all-night session of whisky and poker at the Grizzly Saloon. Swan River Simpson, half-drunk, leaned against a porch-post and watched the packing.

The three men eyed Sad and Swede, as they rode up.

"Couple cow detectives, comin' to see that yuh ain't packin' some loose horses in them pack sacks," observed Swan River dryly.

Mitchell looked malevolently at Sad, but continued packing.

"I got tired of havin' mine stolen," said

Swan River. "Sold my last broom-tail to Kimball yesterday. Let him lose 'em."

"That's the thing to do," growled Mitchell. "Kimball can afford it."

"Well, I ain't kickin'," grinned Swan River. "Couple more poker players like you, and I'll re-tire. Four hundred in an evenin' ain't so bad."

"Stop crowin'," growled Mitchell, yanking viciously at a swing-rope. "It's bad enough to lose to a damned old road-runner, like you, without havin' it rubbed in."

"Are yuh givin' up yore ranch, Simpson?" asked Sad.

"I hope t' tell yuh I ain't. But I ain't raisin' no more horses. No, I think I'll buy me some goats. Mebbe I'll go in for cattle. Must be money in cows, when yuh can lose four hundred dollars in a evenin', and never turn a hair."

"There's money in cows—if yuh sell 'em," replied Sad.

Mitchell turned and looked at Sad.

"What did yuh mean by that re-mark?" he asked bluntly.

"Ain't it a fact?" countered Sad. "Yuh can't make any money on cows, unless yuh sell some—*once in a while*."

"I never seen a detective yet, who didn't think he was pretty damn smart," snarled Mitchell.

Sad laughed and turned away. He didn't want any trouble with Mitchell, who seemed on edge.

"They don't last long, anyway," sneered Mitchell. "Most of 'em are pretty yaller, I understand."

"They come in all colors, I reckon," smiled Sad.

"Most of 'em are yaller," persisted Mitchell. "Damn yaller."

"Yuh talk as though you'd had some dealin's with detectives," smiled Sad. Mitchell dropped a rope and stepped up on the sidewalk near Sad.

"You ain't lookin' for trouble, are yuh?" queried the hard-bitted cattleman. "I've took about all yore lip I'm goin' to, feller."

Mitchell's cowboy tied off a rope-end and moved in, only to find himself blocked

by Swede. Swan River laughed harshly, and that laugh touched off the fury in Mitchell. Apparently Mitchell was a one-punch fighter, because he put every ounce of his power in that one, right-hand swing. There was no attempt to disguise the fact that he was going to swing that punch—he merely drew back and let it fly.

SAD'S head and shoulder twisted aside, just enough to avoid the flying fist, which cracked solidly against a porch-post. Almost at the same moment, Swede suddenly shifted his feet, lifted a left-handed punch from his waist-line, and Mitchell's helper sprawled into the street, almost into the pack-animals.

Mitchell's face was quivering with pain, as he stumbled aside. His right hand was broken—smashed against a wooden post. He dropped it to the butt of his gun, but the hand refused to function.

"Just an old wood-pecker," sighed Sad, "knockin' on wood."

Swede took the helper's gun, removed the cartridges and shoved the gun back in its holster.

"He might wake up grouchy," smiled Swede, pocketing the shells.

Quite a crowd was assembling. Mitchell swore impotently, while the helper managed to get to his feet, a silly expression on his face.

"Yuh better have a doctor fix up that hand, Mitchell," advised Swan River. "You won't be usin' it for a while."

"Aw, go to hell," snarled Mitchell. "My hand's all right."

He walked out and mounted his horse, his lips shut tightly. The helper was still punch-drunk. He looked at Mitchell, felt of his sore jaw, and looked foolish.

"What the hell happened, anyway?" he asked.

"Git on yore horse, and come on," ordered Mitchell.

They rode out of town with their five packed animals, never looking back. Swan River laughed heartily and shook his head.

"When yo're lookin' for trouble—you

allus can find it," he said. "Detective, I'll buy both of yuh a drink, if you'll let me. I ain't had so much fun since I had lumbago. Jist an old woodpecker—peckin' wood! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! C'mon, let's have a drink."

"Could yuh postpone that drink until later?" asked Sad. "We're in a big hurry right now, but we shore appreciate yore offer."

"Go ahead," chuckled Swan River. "The drinks are on me any time you say the word."

Swede looked curiously at Sad, but mounted his horse, without question, and they galloped away toward the Walker ranch. But as soon as they were away from the town, Sad reined off the road, and led Swede in a quarter-circle, back toward the north, avoiding the town.

"I don't like to be nosey," stated Swede, "but do you know where we're goin', Sad?"

"Playin' a hunch," replied Sad. "Keep yore eyes open for Mitchell's pack outfit ahead of us."

They had no trouble in finding the wide trail to the north, on which were the marks



of shod horses. Pack outfits do not travel very fast, and within a short time they saw the Mitchell train, strung along the trail. About six miles from Bear Paw City the trail crossed Lost Horse Creek, where cottonwoods and willows grew in profusion.

From a vantage point, the two cowboys could see the trail beyond the woods. But the pack-train did not come out on it. Sud-

denly Sad looked down the creek, where there was a break in the vegetation, and saw the outfit traveling in the brush. A quarter of a mile below this point was another wide break, but after waiting an hour, during which time the pack-train did not cross this space, Sad grinned widely at Swede, and rolled a cigarette.

"Hived up," he said simply.

"What for, Sad?"

Sad shrugged his shoulders and lighted his cigarette.

"Mitchell is either comin' back to take payment for a busted fist, or he's stoppin' for another matter entirely. Let's go back and see if Swan River still wants to buy a drink."

IX

ENTERTAINMENT is so scarce in the cow country that when a town elects to have a dance, everybody for miles around comes to make merry. Whole families come, even to the babies, and the dances rarely cease before dawn. Liquor flows freely, and the gambling tables are crowded. Fights are infrequent, which adds spice to the entertainment.

Lorna, thrilled to the core, came with Dell Burke. There was nothing blasé about Lorna Kimball. She was a normal girl, bubbling over with excitement. The people crowded the benches around the sides of the big hall. On a small platform sat the fiddler, banjoist, guitarist, and a little, bald-headed man who played an enormous bass viol. A tall, lantern-jawed young man stood on a corner of the platform and called the square-dances in a high-pitched, sing-song voice.

"I don't reckon this is like the places yuh usually dance," said Dell Burke.

"This," replied the wide-eyed girl, "is fun. Cloudy said it might be too rough for me. Why, they even bring babies here, Dell."

"We'll go home before it starts gettin' rough," replied Dell.

"Does it get rough, Dell?"

"There's a bottle in every buggy, behind every fence-post—and more in the saloon. The end of every dance is a signal for a drink. Think what that means—along about the twelfth dance."

"I suppose I might get stepped on," smiled Lorna. "But this is fun."

Zibe Underwood came to Bear Paw City, wearing a celluloid collar and a rusty-black suit.

"Bill Tilton went out to the K Bar K," Zibe told Sad, "so I came on to the dance. Bill hired a jailer for a couple days."

"What about Jack Walker?" asked Sad.

"Well, him and Bunk are still in jail. The prosecutor's tryin' to find out if he's got enough evidence to try 'em. He gave Bill hell for not bringin' in that ring as evidence."

"That ring fell out of the sheriff's pocket," declared Sad.

"Jist between me and you, I think it did, too," grinned Zibe. "But Bill didn't pull that holdup, that's a cinch. If he had that ring in his pocket, how'd it get there? Yuh wouldn't think anybody'd do that as a joke—not with a ring as valuable as that."

"Zibe," said Sad, "if you stole a ring like that, what could you do with it here? You couldn't sell it."

"Well, I might keep it—jist to look at once in a while."

"Knowin' that if yuh was caught with it, you'd go to the pen for a long time?"

"Yeah, that's right. Well, I reckon I'd throw the thing away."

"Or embarrass hell out of some innocent person, by puttin' it in their pocket."

A FEW minutes later Swede and Zibe were talking at the bar.

"What's Sontag got under his hat?" queried Zibe.

"Some sorrel-colored hair and a couple big ears," replied Swede. "Don't worry about Sad; he's doin' his damndest——" Swede paused for a moment, but added, "to get us both shot."

Lorna was having a wonderful, if breathless, time. Four quadrilles in rapid suc-

cession had left her limp and gasping. Never having danced square-dances before, she was at the mercy of rough cowboys, who swung her, regardless. The room was hazy with tobacco smoke.

Dell Burke had disappeared. Lorna wanted a breath of fresh air and a chance to rest for a moment. People were going in and out of the big front door, which opened on the sidewalk, almost opposite the Grizzly Saloon; so Lorna flung a light wrap around her shoulders and went outside.

A number of half-drunk cowboys were laughing and talking; so she walked away quickly, going up the street. None of the stores were open. She saw the dark bulk of a man, standing in a recessed doorway, and hurried along. Beyond the corner of that building was an open space, and she could see a full moon, swinging above the hills.

From across the street came the tinkle of poker chips, raucous laughter, bursts of song. Men were stringing across the street, going to and from the dance-hall. Lorna turned and looked toward the saloon. In the center of the doorway stood a tall cowboy, back-lighted from within the saloon. Apparently he had stopped in the doorway, speaking to someone behind him.

At that moment a rifle shot split the night, and from a corner of her eye, Lorna saw the flash of that shot. It came from the recessed doorway of that store, only a few feet away. Startled and confused she started to run back to the dance-hall, when the man sprang from the entrance, heading for the corner, and crashed into her.

Lorna was knocked sideways, landing on her hands and knees, and the man went sprawling. But he was up in a flash, swept up his rifle, and darted away. Dazed for the moment, Lorna sat there, wondering what it was all about. Men ran up to her. Sad Sontag was there. He lifted her up carefully.

"Are yuh hurt, Miss Kimball?" he asked anxiously.

"No, no," panted Lorna. "I—I'm all right."

Dell Burke was there. He took her away from Sad. Swede was panting.

"Yuh shore he didn't hit yuh, Sad?"

"Burned me a little, that's all, Swede."

"That bullet smashed into the biggest jack-pot they ever had in the Grizzly!" blurted someone. "There's a thousand dollars worth of poker chips still in the air."

Dell was leading Lorna away, and Sad heard her saying something about seeing the man who fired the shot. But men were talking loudly, crowding in around him. Dell led Lorna past the dance-hall entrance.

"Oh, I did see him, Dell," insisted Lorna. "I saw him plain—in the moonlight. It—it was Scotty McKenzie!"

"Sh-h-h-h!" warned Dell. "Things are gettin' rough. I'll take you home. The buggy is right over here."

Sad twisted his way through the crowd, stopping near the dance-hall entrance, where he stood and watched Dell and Lorna going to their buggy.

Swede and Zibe joined Sad.

"God, that was close!" breathed Swede. "It didn't miss me an inch."

"The bullet dang near ripped the top off a poker-table," said Zibe. "My Gawd, it's lucky it didn't hit anybody."

Sad laughed, but without mirth. Dell and Lorna were leaving.

"It might have been Mitchell or his puncher," said Sad, "but I don't believe it. That bullet cut a package of Durham right out of my shirt-pocket, and nicked my arm, just enough to make it bleed."

"What's to be done?" asked Zibe.

"Well, I dunno. You and Swede circulate around and see what yuh can hear. How many of the K Bar K men were in town, Zibe?"

"I seen Dell Burke, Scotty McKenzie and George Ryder. George was at the bar, when we started to come out."

"And Dell Burke's gone home. See if Scotty McKenzie is around."

"Where'll you be?" asked Swede.

"Oh, I'll be in a dark corner—but I'll find you two—later."

AFTER they left, Sad walked down to the next corner, where a short street ran north and south. It was quiet down there. Sad had an idea that the shooter had circled the buildings, and might come back from that end of town. The moonlight was bright. He was standing against the corner, in the darkness, looking down the street, when he saw a horse and a top- buggy cross the street, far beyond the town, going north. It was only a flash, because the horse was traveling at top speed.

A moment later Sad was running across the street and up the other side to the hitch-rack, where they had left their horses. Swiftly he mounted, whirled around and galloped down the street toward where he had seen that horse and buggy.

There was an old road, little used. Sad drew up long enough to assure himself that this was where the buggy had passed, and then he put the horse to a swift gallop. The road was none too smooth, and with many twists, which Sad negotiated at high speed, but which he knew would retard the speed of the buggy.

A little over a mile beyond where he had turned on the old road, the road ran along an old deserted ranch, with a tumble-down fence. Brush grew close to both sides of the road. He raced around a long curve, and just ahead was the horse and buggy, traveling fast.

Sad drew up a little, seeing that he could not pass the vehicle, but rode in close to the swaying, bouncing buggy, his horse's hoofs drumming on the hard road.

"Yuh better pull up that horse!" shouted Sad.

His answer came in the shape of a bullet, which hummed three feet over his head. Again and again the revolver spouted, more as a warning than a danger. Driving a horse, hitched to a bouncing buggy, does not make for marksmanship, and Sad was keeping his horse in too close on the wrong side of the driver to do any accurate shooting.

The buggy horse was galloping now, and the buggy slewed from side to side. A bul-

let came through the back of the buggy, and smacked into the fork of Sad's saddle. Quickly he unfastened his rope. Something must be done quickly, because sooner or later, one of those bullets might stop the pursuit entirely.

Shaking out a sizeable loop, Sad whirled it high, and touched his horse with the spurs. Risking the chance of getting shot, he swung slightly off the road, spurred in swiftly and made the cast. He felt the sting of a bullet across his right shoulder, as, with a prayer in his heart, he dallied his rope around the horn, and checked the horse.

For a moment he thought he had missed his throw. Then came the shock of the tightened rope, his horse buck-jumping against the strain.

Sad saw the rear end of the buggy lift, whirl sideways, and go over on its side in the brush. The horse had been yanked around, dropped flat on its side, and was proceeding to kick at everything in sight.

Sad dropped out of his saddle, drew his gun and was crouching, as he came in close. He heard the smashing of brush, as someone ran away.

There was only Lorna Kimball in the buggy. That is, she was half-in and half-out, looking up at Sad, her face white in the moonlight. He picked her up and lifted her away from the wreck.

"Are yuh all right?" he asked. "Can yuh stand here? That's fine. I've got to untangle that horse. Why, by golly, you're all right, ain'tcha?"

"Yes, I'm all right," she said weakly.

Sad quickly cut the horse loose and got the animal to its feet. The shafts were smashed and some of the harness was broken. Sad tied the animal to a tree, removed the harness and went back to Lorna.

"Sort of a tough young man—that feller Burke, eh?" said Sad.

"Where was he taking me?" she asked wearily.

"Don't you know?"

"He wouldn't tell me. He took me away from the dance, and said he was going to

take me home. And then he came back here."

"Kinda changed his mind, eh? Didn't I hear you tellin' him that you seen the man who shot at me?"

"Did—did Scotty McKenzie shoot at you? I didn't know——"

"You told Burke you saw Scotty fire that shot?"

"Yes, of course I did. Scotty McKenzie ran into me. I saw his face as plain as anything."

"I hope to die from dog-bite!" exclaimed Sad quietly. "Well, you'll have to share one horse with me, Miss Kimball. Oh, he'll carry double. We'll go to Bear Paw City, and get a rig to take yuh home in."

With Lorna in the saddle, they went back to Bear Paw City, stopping at the hotel, where Sad lifted her out of the saddle.

Swede and Zibe saw them, and came hurrying. Sad explained in a few words, while Zibe, wide-eyed and slack-jawed listened.

"Scotty McKenzie!" he gasped. "Dell Burke! Why, Sad, it can't be possible!"

"Ask Miss Kimball."

"Who the devil is this comin'?" exclaimed Swede, as a man on a running horse came down the street. He started to pull up at a hitch-rack, but turned and came to the front of the hotel. It was Cloudy Knight, the K Bar K cook.

"Hell's takin' a recess!" he blurted. "Somebody done knocked out the sheriff and I can't find Kimball. And they took all them Bar S horses!"

"Knocked out the sheriff," parroted Zibe.

"I hope to tell yuh! He's got a goose-ai on his head, and it looks like it might hatch before mornin'. He's shore knocked colder'n a bartender's heart—and them horses are gone! Where's Dell and Scotty and George Ryder?"

Cloudy blinked at Lorna. "Oh, there yuh are. Is the dance tough enough for yuh? Yeah, I reckon it is—yore dress is all torn, and you've got a awful dirty face. Dell ort to git hell for lettin' yuh git in that shape."

"He will," said Sad grimly.

"I—I'll believe every lie you tell me—after this, Cloudy," said Lorna wearily.

"Wait a minute," said Sad. He took Lorna by the arm and led her into the hotel, where the old gray-haired hotel keeper looked at them quizzically.

"This is Miss Kimball," explained Sad. "You put her in a comfortable room, and be danged sure that nobody goes to that room. If you'll sit outside that door, with a shotgun, I'm sure Mr. Kimball will pay you well."

"I dunno what this is all about," replied the old man, "but I'll take care of her, y'betcha. I won't set at her door, though. This is the only entrance to my hotel, and I've got a two-barrel shotgun behind my counter. And I used to be a danged good wing-shot, too."

"I—I can't ever hope to thank you, Mr. Sontag," said Lorna, but Sad was already outside, joining the others.

"All right," he said quickly. "They knocked out the sheriff, swiped Kimball—and took the horses."

"Why swipe Kimball?" asked Zibe.

"Hold him for ransom—hold him as a threat. He's an ace in the hole, Zibe. Call



off yore officers, or we'll kill Kimball. Don'tcha see?"

"Oh, yea-a-ah, that's right. I was thinkin' about that, when Cloudy first mentioned it."

"Some day they'll shoot yuh for yore brains, Zibe," declared Swede.

"Not 'f they know him like I do," replied Cloudy dryly.

"Here's what to do," stated Sad. "Zibe, you and Swede find Swan River Simpson and Whizzer Jackson. We can trust them

two. You'll go along, won't yuh, Cloudy?"

"They never named my family Knight for nothin'," replied the cook. "But why don'tcha find Dell Burke and Scotty and George Ryder. Hell, they'd be glad to go along."

"We'll try and pick them up later," replied Sad dryly.

X

BY THE dim light of two old lanterns, Mitchell and Dick Green, his helper, sat on some boxes in the doorway of an old cabin, deep in the brush along Lost Horse Creek. A fire crackled in the stone and mud fireplace at one end of the small room. Packs and pack-saddles were stacked along the wall. Mitchell's right hand was bandaged, and the air smelled of liniment.

"I still think it was a sucker trick to start somethin' with them detectives," argued Dick Green. "You jist about ruined yore hand—and I'll betcha six horses agin a 'dobe dollar that it made 'em suspicious."

"Na-a-a-aw!" snarled Mitchell. "They wasn't suspicious. Hell, they ain't got no more brains than the rest of the herd. Listen!" Mitchell lifted his head. "Horse comin' down the trail!"

Green lifted a Winchester and hunched back. A moment later the horse stopped, and a voice called:

"Mitch, this is Scotty!"

"Scotty McKenzie," said Mitchell. "All right, Scotty."

The K Bar K puncher strode up to the doorway, leading a horse. He had a rifle in his hand. Dropping the reins, he came up to them.

"Git him?" asked Mitchell.

"Hell, no!" grunted Scotty disgustedly. "Why didn't yuh tell me that gun was soft on the trigger? I caught m' sights against the light, and the damn thing went off. But that ain't the worst of it. I had to make a break out of there—quick. I seen that Kimball girl pass me, jist before I shot, and I thought she'd gone on. But I

bumped into her and we both fell down—and I know damn well she seen who I was."

"Kimball's girl?" queried Mitchell.

"Yea-a-ah, damn it! Dell Burke brought her to the dance. How'd I know she—oh, well, it can't be helped. But I can't go back, that's a cinch."

"You'd better head for Montana," said Green.

"Well, I know damn well that Lost Horse Valley will be too hot for me. The gang ain't back yet, eh?"

"Too early yet," said Mitchell.

"I'll be damn glad to be out of here, too," said Green. "I've been nervous all day. Mebbe it was that sock on the chin—I dunno."

THE three men smoked silently for a while, listening. Green got to his feet and walked the length of the cabin.

"That damn water out there, gurglin' all the time," he complained.

"Now, if it was whisky——" suggested Scotty.

"Dick would have been drowned hours ago," growled Mitchell.

"Ten o'clock," said Green, examining his watch. "Let's pack up and high-tail it out of here, as soon as the gang comes. No use waitin' for mornin', Mitch."

"Suits me," said Scotty. "My feet are itchin'."

Mitchell lifted a hand warningly. "Horse comin'. Mebbe it's the gang."

"One horse," said Scotty. A voice called:

"Mitch, this is Burke."

"Dell Burke! What the hell's he doin' here? All right, Burke."

Dell Burke walked into the lantern-light. He was hatless, one coat-sleeve torn, and one pant-leg was ripped from bottom to knee. There was a deep scratch across his face, and he limped a little.

"What happened?" asked Mitchell.

"Plenty happened, damn it! That girl seen yuh, Scotty. But before she had a chance to blab it to anybody else, I got

her in the buggy. Told her I was takin' her home. Hell, I didn't know what to do. Sontag was there—you never hit him, Scotty.

"I got her out of town, swung back on that old road that leads out on the South Fork. I had an idea of bringin' her out here, when that damned Sontag rode in behind us. I tried to hold that girl, drive the horse, and kill him, all at the same time. He knew who I was. I'm not sure, but I think he roped our horse and threw him. Anyway, the buggy upset, and threw me into the brush, where I lit runnin'. Lost my gun, too.

"I reckon he took the girl back to town. Anyway, I sneaked back and found the buggy horse, tied to a tree. That's how I got here."

"That's great," said Green sarcastically. "Headin' this way, eh? I suppose Sontag is so dumb he won't know where you was headin' for."

"He don't know this country," said Burke. "He couldn't find us, even if he followed that road. Damn it, I've lost a good job, and busted up a fine combination."

"Misery likes company," said Green. "You and Scotty can hide out together. He's scared to go back, too. More'n that, I've got a feelin' that Sontag follered us out of town this mornin'."

"I shore got skinned up in that brush," complained Burke.

"Let's start packin', Mitch," begged Green. "Then we'll be ready to go jist as quick as the boys get here."

"Aw, what the hell!" snorted Mitchell. "We'll sleep here tonight, and get goin' at daylight. My hand aches like toothache. If you——"

"Here come the boys," interrupted Green, "and they're shore comin'!"

There was no hail from any of the new arrivals. The place was suddenly full of horses, milling around, with cowboys cursing, untangling ropes. Order was quickly restored, roped horses tied along an old corral fence, and six men came in, bringing

a disheveled Kimball with them. He seemed to be dazed and frightened—and old.

One of the men was Bob Crosby, former K Bar K rider, but now owner of the R Cross B brand in Montana. Another was Ed Holt, owner of the Box 88. They both shook hands with Burke and Scotty. Kimball eyed his two men in amazement, unable to understand that they were crooked.

"What the hell was the idea of takin' him?" asked Burke, pointing at Kimball. "I didn't know that was part of the scheme."

"It wasn't," laughed Crosby. "But I happened to think that we could use him pretty damn well. Somebody might pay plenty to have him back alive, yuh know."

"What about the sheriff?" asked Scotty.

CROSBY laughed. "It was a cinch. I rode up to the corral and called for Bill—and the poor fool came right up to me. I slid off my horse and told him I had somethin' to show him. Then I smacked him over the head with a wagon-spoke. He never peeped. Then I called for Kimball, and he came right up to me. Then the boys came in quietly, roped all the horses, and we came away. One of the horses smashed into the gate, when we came out, and I think it attracted attention, 'cause I saw somebody come out of the house."

"But you wasn't supposed to be out here, Dell," said Holt. "What went wrong for you?"

"Plenty," replied Burke grimly. "But what are yuh goin' to do with Kimball? You'll lead every damn officer in the state out here. Better not try to make any deal about him."

"Hell, we can't let him go," replied Crosby. "He knows every one of us."

"Dump him in a prospect hole," suggested a hard-faced puncher.

"Fine business," said Burke harshly. "They know I tried to kidnap his daughter. They know Scotty tried to kill Sontag to-

night. If we kill Kimball, they'll hang me and Scotty. You fellers are safe, because there ain't no deadwood on yuh."

"I reckon we'll have to overrule yuh, Burke," said Mitchell. "We've got to be in the clear—the majority of us. No use of *all* of us runnin' our necks into a rope."

The group of ten men were silent, each one of them thinking deeply. They could hear the horses stomping around out at the corral. The fireplace began smoking, and Green got up to kick the logs into a blaze again.

"She's a tough question to decide," said Mitchell quietly. "We've got to get out of here—and we don't want no law on our heels. This is our last trip, it seems to me. We can't let Kimball turn the wolves loose on us. Can't somebody make a suggestion?"

For at least fifteen minutes that group of hard-faced men sat in the dim lantern-light, trying to puzzle a way out of their difficulty. Finally Holt said:

"We might git away with Kimball. Mebbe we could trade him for a lot of money. But it's a damn big gamble. We can't let him go. We've either got to take him with us—or hide what's left of him. Suppose we have a vote. How does that strike yuh, Mitch?"

Green was standing at the fireplace, scowling heavily. Then he stepped over to the group and said quietly:

"There ain't been a horse movin' out there for ten minutes."

The men looked curiously at him, hardly understanding what he meant. Scotty McKenzie got to his feet.

"It shore is damn quiet," he whispered. "I wonder——"

"Over thirty horses at the corral fence," said Green. "They ain't made a sound for——"

"Close the door," said Holt.

"There ain't no door," replied Mitchell. "Douse them lanterns."

The lanterns were quickly extinguished, and the only light was a flickering flame in the fireplace. Green dropped to his hands

and knees, crawling outside and along the cabin in the darkness. The men in the cabin spoke in whispers. Green came back.

"Not a damn horse left," he whispered hoarsely. "Every one gone."

Men swore bitterly. Here and there the mechanism of a rifle rattled softly.

"I knowed it," wailed Green. "Hell, I've been a-tellin' Mitch about it all day."

"Shut up, you fool!" hissed Mitchell.

"Fool!" said Green bitterly. "Trapped like a lot of rats. They've got our horses, ain't they? How long will we last, after daylight? They can lay in the brush and pick us off, one at a time."

"Stack Kimball in the doorway," suggested Crosby callously. "He'll get the first bullet."

FROM somewhere out in the darkness came Sad Sontag's voice:

"Yuh better let Kimball walk out, boys. At least, we can't pin a murder charge on all of yuh, if Kimball ain't hurt. But if Kimball is killed, all of yuh, who live, will swing, as sure as there's a law in Wyomin'."

"Bluff," whispered Burke. "He's alone."

"Yore horses are gone, and the place is surrounded," said Sad. "If yuh don't surrender, the county will save money; but it's up to you. Bullets are cheaper than lawyers, yuh know."

"I think he's right—about Kimball," said Green. "I don't want to face no murder charge."

"If we was only sure about him bein' alone," breathed Mitchell.

"How'r yuh comin' along, Sontag?" drawled a voice near the rear of the cabin.

"Kinda deadlocked, I reckon," laughed Sad.

"Swan River Simpson," said Burke. "I know his voice."

"The boys are gatherin' a little dry bresh back here," said Swan River. "There ain't no winder in the back end of that shack; so we'll stack it there. Nothin' like a little heat to soften up a lot of hard horse-

thieves, Sontag. It'll make good light to shoot by, too, even if we are usin' buck-shot."

The men in the cabin were whispering hurriedly. Dell Burke had an inspiration.

"By God, it'll work!" whispered Mitchell. "They can't take a chance in the dark. I'll go first."

Lifting his voice, Mitchell called:

"Sontag, we're sendin' Kimball out. Don't shoot."

"All right," replied Sad. A man stumbled out in the darkness, but instead of coming straight out, he stepped aside near the corner of the cabin. There was a sound, as though the man had bumped against something.

"Was that Kimball?" asked Sad.

"He's comin'," replied a voice, as another man stepped out. He also moved aside. Suddenly he yelped painfully, grunted—and was still.

"Too bad," said Swede Harrigan. "I missed the second one with the first swipe



—but he's out. I shore got Mitchell clean the first pop. Send out another candidate, will yuh, boys?"

"It didn't work," wailed Green.

"The hell it didn't!" blurted Swede. "C'mon out and try it."

"All right, Kimball," said Bob Crosby. "Get to hell out of here, before yuh git hurt. We're not quittin'. Sontag, this is Kimball."

It really was Kimball that time. He stumbled across the clearing toward the sound of Sad's voice. Sad grasped his sleeve and pulled him down in the brush.

"Keep yore head down," warned Sad. "Hell's due to bust loose."

"I never can thank you, Sontag," quavered Kimball. "They—they were going to murder me."

"Yeah, they're very rough playmates," agreed Sad. He lifted his voice, calling to the men in the cabin:

"Light yore lanterns and put 'em in the doorway. Then yuh can come out, one at a time, throwin' down yore guns in the doorway. It's yore only chance, boys."

"Chance!" scorned Burke. "What a chance we'd have. Damn you, Sontag, we're not givin' up. And we're comin' out—now!"

THE next few moments were kaleidoscopic. It was as though someone had touched off a package of firecrackers. The men were shooting wildly, as they poured from the cabin, running both ways from the doorway, trying to reach the brush. Only one man came straight toward Sad, looming big in the dim light. He was not over six feet away, when Sad fired, and the forty-five bullet whirled him sideways. It was Dell Burke. He went down heavily, crashing into the dry brush. Sad leaped past him, running off to the left of the cabin.

There had been little shooting, except from the outlaws, and that had ceased suddenly. Men were yelling. A gun went off along the ground, and someone yelped painfully.

"Are yuh all right, Sad?" yelled Swede Harrigan.

"Yeah—I'm fine!" panted Sad.

"C'mere, one of yuh," yelled Swan River. "I'm a-settin' on one, and he's about hatched!"

"I'll help yuh," called Cloudy Knight. A moment later there was an audible thump, and Cloudy declared:

"That's the third one I've knighted t'-night."

Ten minutes later, eight disheveled outlaws were ranged along the cabin wall, tied hand and foot. Dell Burke was stretched

on the floor, unconscious. Except for Burke, only one other man was suffering from gun shot wounds.

"What the hell happened?" asked Green painfully. Both his eyes were blacked, and there was a decided lump on his forehead.

"Jist a little strategy," laughed Swede. "While you fellers was arguin' with Sad, and between yourselves, we tied ropes to the two front corners of the cabin, and tied 'em off to the brush. When yuh started to run, they caught yuh below the knees. Then it was easy to pet yuh over the head."

Kimball looked them over shakily, sighed and leaned against the wall. "I don't know yet what it is all about," he said wearily.

Sad turned Dell Burke over and searched his pockets. They netted him nothing of value, but inside the lining of his vest was a decided lump, which proved to be the missing jewelry. Sad handed it to Kimball, who merely grunted. Too many things were happening. Sad turned to Scotty McKenzie.

"Where'd you and Burke cache the money yuh got from Kimball?"

"Find it, damn yuh!" snarled Scotty.

"That don't amount to much," said Sad, "but this does. Kimball wrote to Dell Burke. Burke lied, when he said he didn't get the letter. Arizony Ames discovered where the K Bar K horses were goin'. He overheard you and Dell talkin' about Kimball comin' here; so he pulled out for Dry Wells, to meet Kimball. You followed him to Dry Wells and murdered him, before he could meet Kimball."

"That's a lie!" snorted Scotty. "Dell went—you go to hell!"

"So it was Burke. Well, he may live to hang—I hope."

"How'd you know we was here?" asked Green weakly.

"We followed yuh this mornin'," replied Sad.

"I knowed it! I knowed it—jist as well."

"I give up," sighed Swan River. "Son-

tag, how'd you know all this stuff? Ain't it time yuh told us somethin'?"

"The horse stealin' had me stumped," admitted Sad. "The fact that horses were stolen from the Thirty-three and the Bar S for over a year, before they took any from the K Bar K. There had to be a reason. And that reason had to be, because they couldn't alter that brand."

WHEN I seen Mitchell and his puncher in Bear Paw City, I read the answer. Mitchell rode a Box 88 horse, and his puncher rode one marked with the R Cross B. I had heard that this Bob Crosby had started a ranch a short time ago, and registered the R Cross B. The Thirty-three and the Bar S both brand on the left hip. So does the Box 88. It's a cinch to alter both brands to the Box 88.

"They had to have a alterin' brand for the K Bar K; so they worked out the R Cross B, and registered it on the left shoulder, same as the K Bar K. Mitchell and his outfit, helped by Burke and McKenzie, picked up the horses. Mitchell and company drove 'em north, where the boys from the R Cross B and the Box 88 picked 'em up, and took 'em into Montana. That's why none of the local boys looked guilty."

"That's usin' yore brains!" blurted Swan River.

"Yuh know," said Zibe, "I had a hunch like that the other—oh, well, let's not say anythin' more about it."

"I should hope not," said Cloudy.

"Sontag," said Kimball, "I will need a good ranch manager, and an assistant. If you'll tell me what the Cattlemen's Association pay you, I'll double the ante."

"I'm afraid we'd starve," smiled Sad. "Yuh can't double nothin', Mr. Kimball. We don't work for the Association. That was a little fib that Eph Walker told the sheriff; so he wouldn't arrest us for that stage robbery."

"But—but—" spluttered Zibe, "Bill wired the Association and asked if you

and Swede was workin' on a case here. And they replied, 'I hope so.' What about that?"

"The secretary is my cousin," smiled Sad, "and he has a sense of humor."

"What about the sheriff havin' that diamond ring?" asked Zibe.

"He came into the saloon with Dell Burke," replied Sad. "I figured Dell dropped it in his pocket, before they came in. Mebbe he wanted to see what the sheriff would do when he discovered it. Let's get Burke to the doctor, and the rest of this bunch to jail."

THE dance was still going on when the cavalcade reached town. The sheriff was there, worrying about things, and wondering where Zibe could be, and what had become of Sad and Swede. Lorna was at the hotel, and met her father in the little lobby. The hotel keeper, beaming with importance, came to Sad and handed him a telegram.

"This here telygram came jist after you left," he told Sad, "so I held it here." It was from Jim Sullivan, secretary of the Association, and read:

WHAT IS MEANING OF ALL THESE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOU BEING A DETECTIVE IN LOST HORSE VALLEY STOP ARE YOU PLAYING A JOKE ON SOMEBODY.

"The depot agent said that if there was

any answer, he'd pick it up early in the mornin'," said the hotel keeper. Sad walked over to the desk, picked up a piece of paper and a pen. His reply was:

YES AND YOU WOULD BE SURPRISED HOW WELL IT WORKED.

"Send this collect," grinned Sad. "That's about all I'll ever get out of the deal."

"Me and Bill are headin' for Dry Wells with the prisoners, Sad," said Zibe. "We'll be turnin' Jack Walker and Bunk Barnhardt loose right away. What are you goin' to do now?"

"I'm goin' right out to the Walker ranch, wake Ma Walker up and tell her Jack's cleared."

"And then," said Lorna, grasping Sad's sleeve, "you are coming out to manage the K Bar K for Dad. Swede said you'd take the position."

"He did?" grinned Sad. "I'll betcha you smiled at him, Lorna."

"Could I help smiling—now?" she asked.

"All it takes is brains," Swan River was declaring to the crowd.

"But yuh got to use 'em," said Zibe.

"They won't do yuh any good, layin' dormant, yuh know."

"That's the first smart thing I ever heard yuh say, Zibe," declared Swan River. "Mebbe yours has started t' ferment."

"They ort to," said Cloudy. "They've been mash a long time."

*You're bucking
the odds*



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PROBAK JUNIOR

GREEN EYES

By GARNET RADCLIFFE

THERE are three things in this world which, in the colloquial phrase, take some knowing. Probably you can think of a lot more, but what I refer to are women, the income tax regulations and Afridis. And of the three I maintain that the third-mentioned are the most baffling. For Johnny Afridi is the riddle of the East in a very concrete form. He is an incalculable person, capable of any devilment and about as safe to handle as an untested explosive.

That, of course, explains why the Frontier regiments recruiting Afridi Pathans are so popular with Indian Army subalterns. Youth craves the joy of the unexpected, the thrill of a gamble—against the unguessable. But no subaltern commanding Afridis would admit this attraction. If you asked him he'd tell you his hawk-faced cut-throats were as docile as Gurkhas.

"Old Johnny Afridi? He only wants a bit of handling. If you know how to take him he's all right." And so forth.

Press the subject and the subaltern will tell you *his* pet theory about Afridis. That he will have one is as certain as it is that night follows day. All subalterns hold theories, a rule to which Slade, Adjutant of the Forty First Piffers, was no exception. And his colonel, who had once been subaltern himself although his present girth and dignity rendered that fact difficult to believe, had not shed his habit of theorizing with the letting-out of his Sam Browne and the donning of field-boots. Indeed, he was, if anything, a keener theorizer than Slade himself, and so convinced of the correctness of his theories as to be prepared to back them any day for fifty rupees—especially when it was a theory that concerned Afridis.

But Slade was equally hot on the sub-



*Stolen Ponies and
Alarming Rumors Are
the Chief Exports of the
Country of the Afridis;
Fighting Is Its Principal
Industry*

ject of Afridis. Hence clashes of opinion in the headquarters office of the Forty First were not infrequent. Sometimes Slade proved right, sometimes the colonel did, but much more frequently Johnny Afridi proved them both wrong. Not that that in any way dampened their belief in their pet theories. They talked about exceptions that proved the rule and were more convinced than ever about their own rightness.

THIS story concerns itself with two differing theories. How should you judge the character and capabilities of an enlisted Afridi? The colonel said the only possible way was to examine his sheet roll, that being the name given to the document that sets forth his previous record of service. If the sheet roll was all right, the Afridi was all right. Thus the colonel, speaking, as he often reminded Slade, from twenty-five years' experience.

But Slade disagreed. His theory—based as he often told the colonel on five years of intensive study of the subject—was that the only way you could tell an Afridi's real character was by the color of his eyes. If they were brown or gray, the Afridi was a good chap. If they were black he needed watching. But if they were green—emerald green and shaped like a cat's—their owner was a treacherous, crafty devil and no more to be admitted to a self-respecting regiment than a certified carrier of bubonic plague.

Then came the inevitable bone of contention. He was a machine-gun *havildar*, an Afridi Pathan called Pattu Din. He had served with the Kurram Militia, the Zhob Levies, the Ninth Baluchis and the Third Divisional Machine Gun Company. Now Pattu Din wanted to transfer to the Forty First where there was a vacancy for a machine-gun *havildar*. His present commanding officer, Major Fulton of Divisional Machine Guns, was strongly in favor of the transfer being made. Over a friendly couple of pegs he warned the colonel of the Forty First that if he missed *Havildar* Pattu Din he'd be missing a good thing.

"What's his sheet roll like?" said the colonel. "That's the only way of judging an Afridi, by his sheet roll. If his sheet roll's all right I'll take him."

"His sheet roll is excellent," said Major Fulton. "There's not a single crime entry. In fact, Colonel, if it were any other regiment than yours I'd oppose the transfer. I hate the idea of losing *Havildar* Pattu Din. But since you need a good machine gun *havildar* so badly—well, I'll waive my own interests and let you have him."

Now Slade had been an insignificant third at that talk. He'd been hovering in the background like a groom whose employer is bargaining for a horse. And it struck him that Major Fulton was just a shade too altruistic. And just a shade too eager. If Pattu Din was really such a paragon, why was the major pressing for his transfer with such suspicious eagerness?

"He's selling the old man a pup," thought Slade. "He knows Pattu Din is a swine and he wants to be rid of him."

BUT he'd no opportunity of warning the colonel then. It was arranged Pattu Din plus sheet roll, should be sent over to the Forty First lines to be vetted by the colonel. And when he was marched into the office by the Jemidar Adjutant the following morning, his first glance told Slade that his doubts of Major Fulton's altruism had been only too well founded. He nudged the colonel's arm.

"Don't have him, sir. He's got green eyes. That proves he's as treacherous as an old collie."

The colonel was annoyed. He had been staring at Pattu Din's sheet roll lying in front of him on the desk. If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes he wouldn't have believed it possible for an Afridi with seven years' service to have attained such a sheet roll. The page for crime entries was pure and undefiled as a field of new-fallen snow. Certificates of merit abounded. The only blemish the most critical eye could have detected was that *Havildar* Pattu Din

seemed to have changed his unit with rather curious frequency.

"Rot," said the colonel. "What the devil does the color of his eyes matter? Look at that record of service. You can't say he isn't a good chap in face of that evidence."

But Slade felt it his adjutant's duty to stick to his opinion even in face of irritable seniority.

"I know, sir, but I always say you can't judge an Afridi by his sheet roll. My theory is that a green-eyed Afridi is always



a wrong 'un. I've studied the subject for years. If you take this fellow you'll be sorry. He'll turn out a traitor."

"Bunkum," snapped the colonel. "The record of service is the only way to tell an Afridi. All right, Pattu Din, I will send word to Major Fulton Sahib I am willing to accept the transfer. March him out, Jemidar Sahib."

Havildar Pattu Din's exit would have done credit to a Grenadier sergeant major. As the tramp of his ammunition boots faded away along the veranda, the colonel turned on Slade.

"That's a smart fellow," he said. "Look here, Slade, I'll bet you fifty chips my judgment of Pattu Din is right and yours is wrong."

Slade grinned. Fifty chips would be very useful. He was safe to win the bet, for his theory about green-eyed Afridis had never proved wrong yet.

"I don't like taking your money, sir. Still, if you insist. But you must give my theory a little time to prove itself. Shall we say a year?"

The colonel nodded.

"In a year from today I'll be recommending Havildar Pattu Din for his Jemidar-ship," he prophesied.

TEN months of the year passed. As far as Havildar Pattu Din was concerned they had been ten months of hard work and faultless behavior.

He had become the colonel's pet. As month followed month and the green-eyed havildar's halo remained undimmed, so did the colonel's jubilation increase. For he wanted to prove to Slade that his theory about sheet rolls was right, and that Slade's theory about green eyes was wrong. On occasions—as for instance when Pattu Din's machine gun platoon won the divisional trophy for all-round efficiency—he teased the adjutant about his failure as a prophet.

"What about those green eyes now, Slade?" he said when the report of the machine gun competition had come in.

And Slade, still unconvinced, could only say, "Wait and see."

And then the Forty First were ordered to go to Balla. Balla, in case anybody doesn't know, is a triangular jumble of brown hills some two hundred square miles in extent on the eastern side of the Furious Gomal. It is mainly populated by scorpions and Afridi Pathans. Stolen ponies and alarming rumors are its exports; fighting is the principal industry. In short, it is one of those typical Northwest hornets' nests which never have been civilized and never will be.

Nobody expected the Forty First to civilize Balla. Indeed, the Brass Hats at Pindi would have been quite sorry if they had civilized that most useful training-ground for young soldiers. But there was no real danger of that happening. Among their own bare, grim, brown hills the Balla Afridis were as nearly invincible as makes no matter.

When he heard of the order to go to Balla, Slade sought out the colonel.

"There's one thing, sir," he said, "and that is that in my opinion Havildar Pattu Din ought to be left at the depot. As you know he's a Balla Afridi himself. It would be a big risk to take him with us. An Afridi's a funny beggar at the best of times, but when he's got green eyes—"

"Green eyes my elbow!" snorted the colonel. "Slade, you're a monomaniac. Haven't you yet realized that Pattu Din is the best N. C. O. in the regiment?"

"Oh, he's efficient all right," Slade said grudgingly. "And I'll hand it to him that he's a wizard with a machine gun. But I trust him less than when I first saw him. He's too clever. I don't like him."

"Ugh! Look at his sheet roll," growled the colonel.

"Look at his eyes," retorted Slade. "If you take him to Balla I'll win that bet and I'd much rather lose it than see the regiment disgraced."

Of course the colonel wouldn't give way. He'd rather have left the Subadar Major behind at the depot than Havildar Pattu Din. So when they went to Balla, Pattu Din went too with his platoon, his mules and his six Vickers guns of the latest patterns, all in the very pink of condition.

AND again it seemed as if Slade's theory were wrong. The scrapping began directly they had crossed the Balla border and, so far from behaving in a treacherous manner, the green-eyed havildar did good work. On the evening of the day on which he cleared a hillside of snipers by indirect high-angle fire, raining bullets over a shoulder of the hill while an observer from the platoon signaled the range of the invisible enemy to the gunners, the colonel in high good humor fired the now familiar taunt across the E. P. tent that served as mess.

"How's that for green eyes, Slade? Better write your check for fifty rupees now and have done with it."

"Not a bit of it, sir," Slade said. "We're not out of Balla yet, you know."

Days, weeks passed. The Forty First lumbered round Balla as destructive as a bear in an apiary. Burned villages and ruined crops marked their trail. The Afridis recompensed themselves with stolen Lee-Enfields. Everybody—except the few unfortunate casualties—was happy.

A sordid question of rupees, annas and pice put an end to the picnic. Someone in Simla got an attack of economy and decided that Balla had been subdued. That Balla itself was quite unaware of its subjection to the Raj didn't matter. The Forty First were told to go back to Fort Khol. Much to the disappointment of the Balla Afridis, who yearned to test their stolen rifles and feared that inter-tribal warfare would seem very tame after the glorious sport provided by the Forty First, the well-disciplined regiment about-turned and headed for the Chirka Pass, that being the nearest exit from Balla into comparative civilization.

HAVILDAR PATTU DIN looked at the Chirka Hills with nostalgic green eyes. He was nearing home. Although nobody else in the regiment was aware of the fact, he had been born and bred in a village that was perched like a hawk's eyrie above the ravine-like pass. Sad to relate, he had left his village in black disgrace. Some trifle about the wife of one of his numerous brothers. He had knifed the outraged husband and then had left the village to take service with the British Raj, speeded on his way by the bullets of his furious kinsmen.

Striding at the head of his platoon over the rough track through the foot-hills with the familiar outlines of the Chirka Hills before his eyes, a great desire to visit the old folks at home came to Havildar Pattu Din. He had not seen his father, who was Headman of the village, for nearly eight years. To go through the Chirka Pass without paying him a visit would have been an unfilial act of which Pattu Din would have scorned to be guilty.

It had been decided that before negotiating the steep pass the Forty First would make a three day halt to rest the transport animals. That suited the green-eyed havildar. On the first night of the halt, almost naked and moving as soundlessly as a cat, he crept out of the camp unseen by any sentry.

The prodigal son was going home. Not empty-handed, however. For the purpose of making the peace with that fierce old gentleman, his father, he took with him three Lee-Enfields and as much ammunition as he could carry. He had stolen the rifles from the sides of their sleeping owners with a skill only to be found in an Afridi.

While passing the sentries he had a knife between his teeth. If any sentry had seen the deserter he'd have been a dead man, but no sentry did. It was a very dark night and Pattu Din's skill in crawling was only equaled by his skill in using a machine gun.

Safely clear of the camp Pattu Din looked back to grin.

"That's the third time we have been raided by a rifle-thief since entering Balla," he reflected. "The colonel sahib will be very much annoyed."

A little more than an hour later he was entering his own village. He had ascended by a path up the hills that would have made a goat feel giddy. But giddiness didn't trouble Havildar Pattu Din. Nor did the fact that he was burdened by three rifles and a large quantity of ammunition discommode him in the least.

More lucky than many returning exiles, he found his village quite unspoiled by the march of so-called progress. It was just as primitive as when he had seen it last, a collection of caves and mud huts that looked like the lairs of a colony of wild animals.

THE habits of Afridis are nocturnal. When Pattu Din stole into the village his father and the other elders were squatting round a council-fire. And as it was

a very self-contained little community where inter-marriage was the rule rather than the exception, almost every man present was related to Pattu Din.

The havildar was about as welcome as the poor relation who arrives when the lawyer is opening the will. His father was the first to see and recognize the prodigal. His hand flew to his knife-hilt; he craned through the smoke like some furious old eagle.

"Wherefore art thou come, foot-licker of the English?" he screamed. "Thou dog that betrayed thy salt! Seize him! Sirdar Ali, Nadir Baksh——"

The knives wheeped from the scabbards and flashed round Pattu Din's head. But he forced his way through the throng and laid the rifles at his father's feet.

"Gifts to prove I am loyal to my salt and no friend of the Unbelievers," he cried. "I have come at peril of my life to bring warning to my kinsmen. Back, fools, and



listen to my words. In two days the regiment now camped at foot of the pass is coming to burn this village, destroy the crops and kill every man, woman and child who is found. Allah strike me dead if I speak a lie. It is against the black treachery of the colonel sahib I have come to warn you. Is it a lie? Then Allah destroy me where I stand."

Apparently Allah declined the invitation. The other Afridis were impressed. And they were still more impressed by the sight of the rifles and ammunition—wealth such as had never been seen in that village before.

Pattu Din's father tugged his beard.

"It's a strange tale thou hast brought," he said doubtfully. "Only a few days ago leaflets were dropped from an aeroplane stating hostilities were ended and we had nothing more to fear from the Raj."

Pattu Din's laugh was contempt made audible.

"So you would trust to the faith of the English? Do you not know they are all liars and traitors, given to double-dealing and impossible for honest men to understand? Those leaflets were part of the treachery. The colonel sahib himself gave orders they should be dropped. He hopes to fall on the village unawares. The regiment is to march up the pass as if they had no hostile intent, but when they have reached the open ground at the top——"

With a wealth of detail he described the plot. The tribesmen listened and were convinced. It was just such a treacherous plan as they could have rejoiced in carrying out themselves.

But it's one thing to plot treachery yourself and another to hear that it is being plotted against you. Their faces darkened and they gripped their knives as they listened. These treacherous dogs of Unbelievers! Allah be thanked they had been warned in time!

PATTU DIN'S father wrung his hands in wrath and dismay.

"We can do nothing save go to the hills and hide. How can we fight an entire regiment? The village will be burned and the crops destroyed."

Pattu Din knelt and laid his head on his father's feet in token of submission and fealty.

"May I give thee counsel?"

"Say on."

"Then listen. The treachery and stealth of the English must be met with the same weapons. The regiment must be ambushed as it comes up the pass. They expect no attack; they will be thrown into confusion by the first volley. And then I and the Afridis in my platoon who are all loyal men like myself will come to your assist-

ance. We march in the front of the regiment and it will be a simple matter to take the rap-rap guns that are in our charge and turn them on the others. In that narrow place where there is no escape they will be slaughtered like sheep. There are six rap-rap guns each firing faster than a regiment. The regiment will be utterly destroyed and the rifles and gear will become our property. Is it a good plan, my kinsmen?"

A deep chorus of "*Wah's*" signified assent. Pattu Din sprang to his feet.

"Then all that remains is to decide where the ambush can best be laid. I must know the exact spot so that I can be ready to



use the rap-rap guns. But we must make haste. I have to return to the camp before my absence is detected; otherwise the colonel sahib might suspect I had come to give thee warning of the treachery he has planned. Come, let us plan the ambush."

Just before dawn the green-eyed havildar got back into the camp. As before he crept unnoticed past the sentries. Next morning he was the first N. C. O. to detect that the camp had been visited by a rifle-thief during the night, and was commended by the colonel for his vigilance.

TWO days later the Forty First struck camp and moved up the Chirka Pass. In view of the fact that hostilities were over it was not judged necessary to picket the heights. An advance guard was sent out and that was all.

But on the Northwest Frontier you never know. As the event proved there *was* an

ambush prepared about half-way up where the pass was narrowest. It was a clever ambush. Indeed, if it had not been for the prompt behavior and magnificent shooting of one man the situation might have been quite nasty.

The hero of the occasion was Havildar Pattu Din, who, fortunately, was with the vanguard. He was easily the first to detect the trap. Before anyone else had realized there was a hostile tribesman within twenty miles, he had mounted a machine gun and was spraying the sides of the pass with bullets as a gardener sprays a vine.

"Amazing" is the only word adequate to describe that shooting. Not only was Pattu Din out for his Jemidar-ship, but he was also out for a long-delayed revenge on his male relatives. His first burst went into the cave where he knew his old father and uncles were lying doggo. The second was for the cleft in the rocks he had recommended to his brothers and cousins. He didn't miss much. An expert machine gunner who knew beforehand exactly where

his targets are can dial death as he likes.

Ambition and a thirst for revenge were the incentives that steadied his aim. With long bursts and short bursts he smoked the ambush party from their hiding-places. He enfiladed them as they ran. And before the tail of the first belt had clicked through the feed-block he knew he had won both promotion and revenge.

Colonels have souls above crowing, but that evening the one who commanded the Forty First, now camped on the civilized side of the Chirka Pass, felt it his duty to point out a few truths to his adjutant.

"So you see, Slade! As usual I was right and you were wrong. There's nothing treacherous about Pattu Din although he has green eyes. His behavior today proved your theory all bunkum. And, Slade, I seem to remember something about a little bet——"

"Will you take notes or a check, sir?" the adjutant said humbly. "Pattu Din must be the exception who proves my rule about green eyes is correct."

In the next SHORT STORIES

Two crooks thought the "Major" was their particular pearl which had come off the good ship Oyster!



The "Oyster's" Pearl

A Major Novelette

by

L. PATRICK GREENE



RULE OF THUMB

By KARL DETZER

Author of Many Well Known Stories of the Michigan State Police

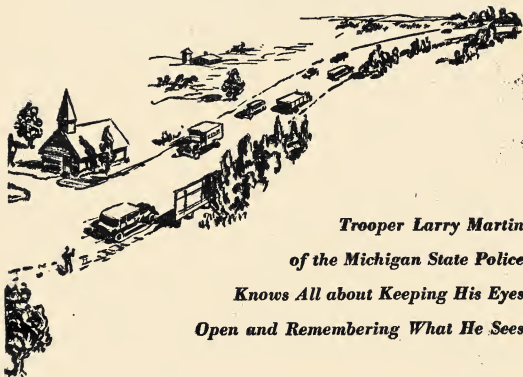
TROOPER LARRY MARTIN crossed the state line between Indiana and Michigan at seven o'clock that June morning. He had spent the night in South Bend, where he delivered a repentant embezzler to the sheriff of St. Joseph County. It had been an unexciting task. Now, en route home, there was no need to hurry. He swung from State Highway 40 into U. S. 12 at Paw Paw. Squinting into the bright sunshine, he whistled dolefully while he thought of the three hundred odd miles that still lay between him and his station at Traverse City.

Instead of the trim blue and gray uniform of the Michigan state police, Martin

traveled today in an inexpressive dusty brown suit, slightly baggy at the knees, and a brown slouch hat somewhat the worse for five years of off-duty wear. His small dark car, like himself, was in plain clothes. Clipped over each door, to hide the police insignia and white stenciled number, an inconspicuous patch of waterproof cloth hung neatly.

So to most observers along the way, Martin might have been a traveling salesman out on his rounds. Only initiates would have observed the patch on the door, the military set of the driver's broad shoulders, and the slight bulge which the shoulder holster made under his left arm.

He drove steadily at forty miles an hour,



***Trooper Larry Martin
of the Michigan State Police
Knows All about Keeping His Eyes
Open and Remembering What He Sees***

thoughtfully observed the license plates on all cars that passed him, and ignored the jabbing thumbs and the pleading eyes of hitch hikers who were strung along the highway every half mile or so, down in this part of the state. Martin had a particular aversion for hitch hikers. They wanted something for nothing, which was the trouble with too many people these days. He passed them up, as a matter of principle. Besides, they made trouble sometimes.

Thus he passed through Kalamazoo, where he turned north again on U. S. 131. The short-wave radio receiver under the dash was signaling at the minute, and the operator in the station at East Lansing announced: "WRDS, Michigan State Police, testing. Time, 10:45 A. M."

Trooper Martin yawned and looked at the gasoline gauge. Why didn't the sergeant send some of those young troopers on these long trips? Why pick on the oldest man in the post? He yawned again. No denying he was getting old. Time that somebody got round to thinking of making him a corporal. Of course they weren't

making any corporals these days; or sergeants, either. Breaking them, instead. Economy.

HITCH HIKERS were strung more thickly along the road here, busy with their thumbs. Martin paid no attention to any of them until he had passed Plainwell, twelve miles north of Kalamazoo. Then, without reasoning why he did it, almost to his own surprise, he pressed slowly on his brake and pulled over to the side of the road.

Another young man had hailed him, begging a ride. But something in this one's manner of walking and his method of signaling interested the trooper. The hiker didn't limp. But he stepped uneasily, as if his feet hurt; as if he weren't used to walking, maybe. He was slightly under medium height, exceedingly thin, and he carried a light tan raincoat over his left arm.

Martin leaned across and opened the right hand car door, and the man ran, still with the peculiar gait, and climbed in.

"Mornin'," Martin said. "Noticed the new wrinkle. Where you goin'?"

"What new wrinkle's that?" the young man asked. His voice was harsh, yet not loud, as if his vocal cords had sand in them. "Going to Grand Rapids. Looking for a job."

"Yeh." Martin nodded. "Lots of people do that. You ask what new wrinkle? Well, when there's hitchers hangin' 'round every cross road in bunches like bananas, and all of 'em thumbin', what do *you* do? You go original. Don't use your thumb. Just point your finger."

The fellow grinned. Martin, observing him professionally saw that he had three gold teeth in front, and a small triangular scar on his upper lip and that the upper lid of his right eye drooped slightly.

"Never thought of that," the young man said. "Fact is, though—if I was to thumb my way, I'd do a long stretch of sitting on the roadside."

He held up his right hand and the trooper, glancing at it, realized that it was necessity rather than originality which had drawn his attention to the man. For there was no thumb. It had been amputated—and not so long ago, either—and the scar testified to poor or hurried surgery, and there were several small black spots imbedded on the edge of it.

"I see," Martin nodded. He made a clucking, sympathetic sound with his tongue. "Too bad. How'd you lose it?"

The hitcher did not at once reply; instead he had bent forward and was observing with some curiosity the volume control knob of the short-wave radio, clamped to the steering post. It was unlike an ordinary car radio, in that there was no dial, for a police receiver is set to intercept only its own frequency. Martin had turned off the radio before he stopped the car, so that now not even the gentle continuous crackle of the generator sounded in it.

The hitch hiker asked, "What kind of chatter box is that?"

Trooper Martin drove twenty yards before replying. Then he merely evaded. "Old fashioned. It's broke," and persisted, "How'd you lose your thumb?"

"Got it jammed up in a fanbelt," the young man reported. He continued to look distrustfully at the radio.

"That's too bad," Martin sympathized. He glanced again at the man beside him, classifying him professionally. A rowdy sort of kid, probably, but nothing really remarkable about him. Anyone might get a thumb off, one way or another, or have three gold teeth, or a small scar on his upper lip, or a droop to one eye. No, nothing remarkable except his bright tan shoes, and they were unusual only because they covered a hitch hiker's feet. Most fellows Martin had noticed hiking up these pavements wore big, heavy old shoes, that wouldn't hurt, in case everybody was too hard-hearted to pick them up.

This man's shoes were new and nicely shined, without a scratch or stone bruise on them; new, and small, too, with hard narrow pointed toes. Martin could see the way the fellow's foot pressed out at the sides; if he ever went hitch hiking himself, he decided, he'd certainly put on a pair of shoes that was big enough.

HIS passenger remained silent, unlike most hitchers; they liked to talk, all the ones Martin had ever known; tried to pay for their rides by telling humorous anecdotes. He didn't like anecdotes while he was on the road; they kept him from



watching car numbers closely enough as they approached and passed him. Fortunately, this fellow merely sat smoking cigarettes.

Martin entered Grand Rapids. He had crossed three sets of railroad tracks and

driven a mile through the south side industrial section, when the passenger suddenly said:

"Hey, look it—I'm getting out here!"

Martin pressed on the brake a little too hastily, and the man was thrown forward, off his balance, so that he lifted his right hand quickly and caught the windshield, to keep from being pitched against it.

"Sorry," the trooper apologized, "didn't mean to do that."

"S all right," the hitch hiker said.

"Hope you get that job," Martin told him.

"Hope so," the fellow replied. "That's a police radio, ain't it?"

"Where y' ever get that idea?" Martin countered.

The fellow laughed, and climbed down without remembering to say thank you.

Martin grunted. That was the way with these thumbers. Lift 'em thirty-five miles, and they walk off without even offering a cigarette. And this one wasn't so dumb, either. He watched the fellow limp up the street and around the corner.

Martin lighted his corncob pipe, reflecting that it was his own fault. He should have stuck to his rule of never picking up anybody.

He followed the rule, thereafter; simply drove northward alone into the waning afternoon, and as the sun prepared to settle behind the hills, he turned off the concrete into the cinder drive at Seventh District headquarters in Traverse City. He stretched noisily and thoroughly as he climbed out, made a note of his total mileage, and walked into the district commander's office.

That rangy lieutenant turned from the typewriter on which he was pecking out his daily report, tipped his cap farther back on his head, took a pair of good-luck dice out of his pocket and rolled them together in his hand.

"Get your buddy to South Bend all right?" he asked.

"Yeh," Martin replied. "Here's the

receipt for him, sir. That sheriff was tickled to make his acquaintance again. Put him right in behind the revolvin' door."

"Anything on the road to report?"

"Nothin', sir."

"Much traffic?"

"Nothin' but leg. If every thumb that jerked my way was a dollar, I'd retire for life."

"Well, I'd hate to lose you, Martin, so I'm glad they aren't dollars." The lieutenant grinned and tossed a piece of scratch paper across the desk. "You might look into this tonight."

"Who? Me? Tonight?"

The commander missed the anguish in Martin's voice. He went on carelessly. "This lady reports how some gunmen invaded her chicken coop last night and hooked two settin' hens. Down to Empire, in Leelanau County. Run over there after supper." He ignored the expression on the trooper's face. "When you're done with that, you better take a trip around the horn, through Provemont and Sutton's Bay. Look for headlight violators. Get in by midnight," he added, "and you'll have plenty sleep."

ALONZO P. HARDESTY had placed his bag of golf sticks and his new steel rod and box of flies in the back seat of his car in Chicago shortly before nine o'clock that same July morning. He swung through Grant Park, followed the Dunes highway across Indiana around the end of Lake Michigan, and U. S. 12 as far as Kalamazoo. Then he turned north into U. S. 131 approximately an hour and fifteen minutes after Trooper Martin had swung around that same corner.

At noon from the lobby of the Hotel Pantlind at Grand Rapids, he telephoned to his wife at Clear Lake, in Mecosta County, directing her to meet him in Big Rapids at half past three and go with him to the country club.

Three miles north of Howard City, he slowed to pick up a hitch hiker who was

limping slightly and pointing northward with his finger instead of his thumb.

"How far you going?" Hardesty asked, by way of opening the conversation.

"Big Rapids," the man told him. "Looking for a job."

"That's where I'm going," Hardesty said. "Jobs still pretty scarce?"

The young man talked affably. It was not until they had passed Stanwood that something about the fellow stirred Hardesty's suspicion. The tan raincoat, which the hitcher had allowed to sag over his knees, somehow had slid up so that it covered his lap. From beneath it suddenly poked the muzzle of a revolver.

"Now, mister," he warned Hardesty, "no funny business. I don't want to iron you off, see? All I want is your money and your car."

Hardesty cried: "Why, you——"

"Ste—ady," the other warned. "Drive on. Careful!"

"I'll get out here," Hardesty offered, his words scraping up dryly through his throat. "Give you my purse. You take the car."

The other shook his head.

"Not here, no. Too much traffic. Too many people. You go on, till I tell you to stop. I know a place where you'll not get to a telephone right quick. Just keep going. And not a funny move."

TROOPER MARTIN completed his investigation of the disappearance of two setting hens in the village of Empire and drove north through the darkness up the long hill on the lake shore road. A chill fog was blowing in from the beach and Martin closed the window on his left. He wore his uniform tonight, dark tunic with broad gray shoulder patches, gray breeches and black belt, and puttees. The radio had completed its 9:30 summary of all calls since the previous midnight and was busy with routine signals and dispatches.

The Ohio state sheriff's radio had just reported, and WRDS had rebroadcast the

fact, that seventy-two pairs of pants had been stolen tonight from a store in Perrysburg. Then the signal buzzed again.

"Attention Rockford and Traverse City posts and cars," the operator said crisply. "A missing person report. Alonzo P. Hardesty—H for Holland, A for Adrian, R for Richmond——"

Martin listened to the spelling with neither great interest nor enthusiasm. Too often the night air was cluttered with missing person reports, which, when, traced down, merely meant that some wife had got worried because her husband was late getting home from lodge.

"This man left Grand Rapids shortly after noon," the operator in East Lansing said. "He is believed to have had a considerable sum of money on him. His wife was to meet him in Big Rapids. She was there, and thinks she saw him drive right through town. There was at least one other party in the car with him. She thinks Hardesty was driving, and this other party was sitting beside him. There may have been a man in the back seat."

Martin, driving along slowly, allowed three deep wrinkles to gather in his forehead. He'd been over exactly that route at approximately that time. No, a little earlier. Just before noon. How could a man disappear between Grand Rapids and Big Rapids in broad daylight? The frown deepened as he listened.

"There seems to be no doubt that the wife is right," the operator in East Lansing said. "A filling station keeper in Reed City reports seeing car of this description, with two men in it, headed north about half past three or a little after. They appeared to be arguing. All cars keep a close lookout."

The voice paused. But Martin was still thinking about the case when the operator directed: "Rockford post send a car north to pick up trail of this missing man. Repeating description of missing person and missing car—1934 model Deluxe sedan, six wire wheels——"

Martin had pulled off at the side of the

road and was writing the descriptions on his log. He'd found his memory sagging of late; it was better to put everything down in black and white, and then a man could have something to check back on. He started again at last, turned east at Duck Lake school corner, and jogged over the black surface of the county road toward Provenmont.

As he topped the rise west of the village and came down into town, past the gasoline storage tanks which loomed on his left, he was aware suddenly of some excitement ahead in the street. A dance was in progress; he could see the lights in the community hall, and the cars parked in a disorderly clutter near the church. But out in the highway men and women were milling in small groups, heads close together.

THE trooper halted at the intersection and looked and listened. Now that his business did not take him across state lines, he had removed the waterproof shield from the car door, and the number 55 and the police insignia stood out clearly, painted white on black.

At sight of it the crowd moved. A plump smallish man with a round grave face and reversed collar stepped forward quickly.

"Hello, Father, what's up?" Martin asked.

The priest's expression was deeply troubled. The crowd which had been chattering in French-Canadian *patois*, in Polish, and in sharp short English sentences, became suddenly quiet. Before the priest spoke a car thundered over the planks of the wooden bridge, across the narrows of the lake a hundred yards away.

"That's the sheriff now, I guess," the clergyman said. "We've got a dead man on our hands, Trooper."

"Dead man?" Martin repeated. "Hit and run?"

"No, no." The priest waited till the sheriff drove up hurriedly, unbent his six feet two and his two hundred pounds, and

climbed down backwards from his car. "Come here, Minnie," the priest said, then. "Tell these officers about it."

A girl with dark eyes set wide apart and a droop to her mouth which prevented her from being pretty, stepped forward uneasily. She had been crying and tear stains covered her face.

"We were having a dance," the priest said. "Polish wedding dance. Minnie, here, and three other girls got tired. Wedding dances last a long time——"

"Yeh, I know," Martin said. He nodded to the sheriff; he knew this big fellow—a good egg, liked to work with him.

"Minnie was cleaning a cottage today, four miles south of here on Lake Leelanau," the priest explained. "The owners are coming up tomorrow. They sent her the key so she could get the place ready. She still had the key tonight, so she and these other girls—those are the three standing over there—got into a car and drove down to that cottage. Tell them what you found, Minnie."

The girl gulped.

"Gosh, we was fools!" She addressed Trooper Martin.

He waited, not committing himself.

"Just wanted to rest," she said. "We went down and I unlocked the door. Right away I smelled something. Cigarettes, I guess. Tobacco, anyways. I ought to have known then somebody'd been in."

"You went right in?" the sheriff asked.

"Sure we did. We was tired, wasn't we? I knew where the lamps was. Electric lights, they ain't hooked up yet for the season. I lighted a lamp, but there wasn't any chimley for it."

"What time was that?" the sheriff asked.

"Gosh," Minnie said, "about half an hour ago."

"Then what?" Martin demanded.

"Why, we was looking for a bed, I tell you. Wanted to lay down. We just goes in the downstairs room and there he lays."

"Who?"

"This dead fellah."

"Yeh," Martin said, "dead. Know him?"

The girl shook her head. "No, but he looks high-toned enough. Like a resorter or something."

"We'll go see," Martin said.

WITH Minnie beside him, to show the way, he started southward in his car along the west shore of Lake Leelanau. He questioned the girl again as he drove. She seemed singularly untouched by her discovery. He wondered what young people were coming to.

"Here's the place," Minnie said, after about six minutes. They approached a cottage, that stood alone, without neighbors. "Turn in at that gate."

Martin obeyed. At the door the girl said, "Go straight ahead and you'll see him, all right. Me, I'm staying outside."

Martin pressed the button of his flash-lamp and looked around. He saw nothing unusual. Then he said, "Door's open."

"Think we stopped to close any door?" The girl drew back, and Martin, with the



sheriff and the priest, entered the cottage.

No odor of cigarettes remained now on the air, since the door had been open for half an hour. The three men sought the downstairs bedroom.

The man on the bed was well dressed, of middle age, with slightly graying hair. His hands were tied behind him with a piece of heavy line, and the back had been blown out of his head. The rear right-hand trousers pocket hung, inside out, but

except for that there was no sign of struggle. The bedding was not disarranged.

Martin touched the body and drew back his hand quickly.

"Why, he's almost warm!" he exclaimed. "Hasn't been dead very long. Here, Sheriff, let's see if we can find any identification on him."

Two minutes later he straightened up.

"Hardesty's his name," he said huskily. "Maybe I know something about this case." He opened his notebook. Yes, that was it. Hardesty. Alonzo P.

A NEAT sedan, bearing Illinois license plates, rolled southward swiftly on U. S. highway 131, past the gaily lighted filling stations in the village of Manton. The young man who drove was whistling to himself between puffs at a cigarette. As the lights of another town appeared he ceased whistling. An illuminated sign announced "Cadillac."

"Might as well get me some java here," he told himself. In front of a restaurant he parked his car, turning it in at an angle against the curb. The restaurant was deserted except for a single waiter with dark skin and stiff straight black hair, who was sitting in front of a radio fussing with the dials. The traveling young man saw with interest that the station finder pointed far over to the left into the short-wave band.

To the waiter he said, "Cup of coffee, without cream," and sat down on a high stool at the counter close to the radio.

At the same time the instrument spoke.

"Rockford post send car north to pick up trail of this man. Repeating description of missing person and missing car—1934 model DeLuxe sedan, with six wire wheels." The waiter brought the steaming cup and pushed the sugar bowl closer. But the young man wasn't paying any attention to coffee at the moment. He was listening to the description of the missing car and its license number. That was the same number which just now was parked there at the curb. He'd have to get out fast. He picked up the coffee in his left

hand, drank hurriedly, threw down a coin, and went back to the street.

Half a dozen other cars stood nearby. He walked past them, slowly, glancing into the front seat of each. The keys were removed from their ignition locks. The young man scowled.

There was still another machine down the block, but as he started toward it, he saw a policeman crossing the street, keeping an eye on him. He turned abruptly and went back to the car he had originally been driving. The policeman was coming on slowly. Inside the restaurant the radio was repeating the description. Its words cried out through the open door:

"Driving a car with Illinois license——"

The young man stepped on the starter, backed away from the curb, and drove southward at an inconspicuous speed while the policeman stood on the curb and looked incuriously after him.

TROOPERS VAN AND LANG, in response to Martin's first telephone call, arrived at the somewhat isolated cottage on Lake Leelanau shortly before midnight.

Trooper Van climbed out first, carrying a long black fingerprint camera and a fat brief case filled with camel's hair brushes of various sizes, squat jars of dusting powders in light and dark tints, magnifying glasses, films and identification cards.

Martin, however, had not been idle. While his partners were covering the thirty miles from their post, he had managed to pick up certain information. To begin with, the cord which bound the dead man's hands turned out to be a piece of fish stringer, with its brass ends still attached. And the position of the body indicated that there had been no struggle, for not even the rug beside the bed was disarranged and the bedclothing was smooth.

The murder had been committed here, right at this spot; of that there was no doubt. No man could have lived ten seconds after that single shot, and besides there was no blood upon the floor, which

there would have been had the body been carried into the house. Except for eighty-five cents, which the murderer either had missed or been indifferent to, no money remained in the dead man's pockets.

But another group of facts impressed itself chiefly upon the trooper. Tracks of a car had broken through the moist crust caused by the evening dew on the sandy approaches to the cottage. This car had come into the gate and had stopped directly in front of the steps. Footprints of two men, so indistinct as to be of no value in themselves, led from the left side of the car to the cottage door, and the prints of one man from the door to the car. The lock on the door had not been broken, nor, as a careful search disclosed, had any of the window fastenings been tampered with, which indicated that one of the men, at least, had had a key, or that the lock had been skillfully picked.

"Looks like they might of lived here in this house," the sheriff said.

"Looks it," Martin muttered. "Funny."

Yet the sheriff had never heard of Hardesty, nor did the name mean anything to the group at the gate. Martin sought out the girl, Minnie.

"Listen, miss," he began, leading her to his car, out of hearing of the other, "tell me all over again, just how this happened."

But the girl's recital brought out no new facts. Martin prodded her: "How long you worked here?"

"Four, five year. Summers, while these people are resorting."

"Who are the people?"

"Gosh, just two old maids. From Detroit."

"They have lots of company?"

She shook her head. "Never."

"No relatives to visit?"

"Don't think they've got relations."

Martin took time to relight his pipe. "Who's worked for them? Right from the start."

The girl thought for a moment.

"Old man Boulanger built the cottage.

Lives over there in town. Noah Pinski was the only one to help."

"Who's Noah?"

"Gosh, he's just a fat guy. Lives over across the lake toward Fountain Point."

Martin checked old man Boulanger and the fat Noah in a mental index.

"Who else?" he demanded.

"Charley Smith. He painted the place. Comes from down around Arcadia. Gets back here sometimes."

"What for?" Martin asked.

SHE told him pointedly, "You're plenty dumb. To work, of course. They send for him. Want him to varnish, maybe, things like that. He's a good looking fellow."

"Sez you," Martin grunted. "What you mean?"

"Oh—" she hesitated, and giggled. "Well, he's kinda thin—not so tall—just good looking, that's all." She paused, thinking. "He's got some swell store teeth."

"Gold, you mean?"

"I'll say. It wasn't him did this, though."

"Who else works here, then?" Martin demanded again.

"Just Mrs. Ryan. She's the cleaning lady. Lives over across the hill."

"Big woman?"

"Oh, sure. Weighs about two hundred."

Martin added Mrs. Ryan and Charley Smith to his mental list. "Anybody else?"

"Gosh, unless you count the Bedford boy. He weeds the garden."

"How old a fellow?"

"Thirteen. Wasn't him did it, either."

"You tellin' me?" Martin reproved her.

"This girl, Minnie," he told the other troopers as they arrived a few minutes later, "says she went over everything in this bedroom with a damp cloth about five o'clock tonight. It ought to be easy to find prints, unless this party wore gloves."

Trooper Van already was dusting aluminum powder on the dark footboard of the

bed. He asked, over his shoulder, "That girl at the bottom of this?"

Martin shook his head. "You're always thinkin' of women in it."

"Oh, yeah?" Van bent closer to his work. He stood up suddenly. He had found something. "Here they are," he exclaimed.

Trooper Martin focussed his flashlight upon a group of silver patches.

"All four fingers of the right hand," Van said.

"Four?"

"And here's the left. Four fingers and thumb."

He handed Martin a small magnifying glass.

"Notice that right index finger?" he pointed out. "See that small scar—shaped like a Y? Clear, isn't it?"

Martin took a deep breath but did not speak. He was studying the other prints, the four right hand fingers and the slightly blurred impressions of the left hand. They put an idea into his head. While he was still thus engaged a man came over to the door.

"Listen," he called, "your radio's still open and somebody's yellin' for you in it. Says one of you come to telephone and report."

"I'll take it," Martin said. He stood up and straightened his back. "Ain't science grand?" he asked Van.

"You kidding me?" Trooper Van demanded.

"Not a bit," Martin answered. "Give me that extra bottle of dust, will you? I know how to brush up prints, too."

He drove away quickly; half a mile up the road he halted and spent five minutes in the front seat of his car, following out his theory alone.

IN THE main street of Cadillac, the machine with Illinois license plates moved slowly southward after leaving the restaurant. Beyond the business section it turned west, and suddenly put on speed. It passed Benson Corner, swung north

through the hamlet of Boone, and west again through Harrietta, where it crossed the railway tracks.

At Brethern its driver quietly broke the lock on a gasoline pump in front of a garage and filled his tank, then continued in the direction of U. S. highway 31. He arrived in Manistee without mishap, and after circling the north shore of Manistee Lake, parked his car in a dark side street and limped forward on foot.

This precaution proved valuable to him, for as he turned a corner where the new highway bridge loomed ahead, he observed that a car without lights was parked in the middle of the bridge, with a man in uniform standing beside it.

The discovery changed his plans but did not dismay him. When a man knows a territory, it's impossible for even smart



police to block every hole. And these police, the young man reflected, weren't smart. Like most cops, they were blind to everything except the obvious. True, they were hunting this car. But did they know that Hardesty was dead?

And even if they discovered that much, which was unlikely, they'd have no way of telling who killed him. They were hunting the car, of course; watching for it to go south. Well, if it went north, they'd be disappointed, wouldn't they?"

There were plenty of places to hole in up north, especially if you have relations to visit. And plenty of woods to hide a car.

That's what a smart fellow would do, he figured; just what the dumb cops wouldn't expect. He returned to the machine and

swung back northward into U. S. 31. Five miles from town he turned left into Michigan highway 22. Let the dumb cops waste time watching bridges!

FROM Provemont, Martin called his office as the radio directed. He shook his head impatiently at his district commander's new orders.

"Me go on bridge guard?" he exclaimed. "Listen, sir."

He argued for some five minutes; then ran back to his car and turned westward. He was right—couldn't be anything else. It wasn't just a hunch. What was the matter with headquarters? Lieutenant had sounded pretty mad at the other end.

He stepped on the gas. They'd eat him up tomorrow if this idea came out wrong now. But how could it go wrong? He could read prints as well as the next one.

Thirty minutes later he roared through Empire, where two stolen hens earlier in the night had required his attention. The radio had been silent for a few minutes. He was starting up the long hill when it suddenly vibrated. The voice of the dispatcher cried:

"Attention, everyone! Deputy at Bear Lake just shot it out with Illinois car going north! Step on it, you men in that vicinity."

North! Just as he'd figured—just as he'd told the lieutenant on the telephone.

Martin drove faster. He bumped across to U. S. 31 between Big and Little Platte Lakes, roared up Benzonia Hill, and near the settlement of Joyfield, just south of the Benzie-Manistee County line, jammed on his brakes.

A car without lights was parked in the road ahead of him.

Martin loosened his revolver, turned on his spotlight, and driving with his left hand, approached it carefully. No one was in it. He drove past, came up behind it, and recognized the number on the Illinois license plates. It was Hardesty's car. But why had the fellow left it?

The trooper turned, and drove past it again. It was empty, all right. And that was a bullet hole in the rear window, too high to have hurt anyone. And another hole in the gasoline tank. That's what had stopped it. It had lost its gas.

Where was the driver? Where the Bear Lake deputy?

Martin examined the seat of the abandoned car carefully for bloodstains. There was none. Satisfied of it, he pulled out his road map of the district and studied it thoughtfully. He took his time. If he were right in his assumptions, he had all the time in the world. If he weren't—

Of course the Bear Lake deputy might have caught the fellow. If so, the radio soon would tell it.

Dawn was beginning to show through the tree tops when he got into his own car and started northward at a leisurely pace. There still was no reason to hurry. As the map had promised, an inconspicuous byway left the main road, cutting through a strip of second growth on the left. Martin got down and looked for footprints.

He found some. But whose? Doubt assailed him for a moment. He was taking a chance. He might just be wasting his time.

He followed the byway. It wandered aimlessly for a mile, then forked. A weathered sign pointed to the left to Pierport, right to Arcadia. He turned right. As he expected, the footprints turned that way, too.

A quarter of a mile farther he overhauled a man limping heavily. The fellow glanced over his shoulder at the sound of the approaching car, halted, and pointed a finger in the direction of Arcadia.

"Ride?" he shouted.

Martin opened the door as he came abreast of him. "Jump in, buddy," he said. "So you're Charley Smith with the store teeth."

The man stared at him. Martin's revolver was poking through the door.

"Put 'em both up this time, Charley," the trooper ordered. "Atta boy!"

HE QUICKLY searched the man. "Didn't expect the pleasure so soon after yesterday's ride," he said. "So that's your gun!" He weighed it on his left hand, his own revolver still aimed steadily in his right. "Ain't much of a gun. But the ballistics experts can use it. It'll prove you killed Hardesty. Wrists, Charley. That's it. I like 'em to fit snug. Get in, we're goin' to town."

The car started.

"You left four fingerprints and no thumb on that bed, Charley," Martin revealed, "and some more just like 'em on my windshield. Maybe you forgot how I threw you off the seat yesterday, comin' into Grand Rapids? And them black spots I see where your thumb used to be, is powder burns. It wasn't a fanbelt took that thumb off. It was a gun. You'd been around in your time, too. Enough to know what a stretch meant, anyway. Said you'd do a stretch of waiting if you had to use a thumb."

From Bear Lake, while the deputy sheriff guarded the speechless prisoner, Martin called his post.

"I knew it was somebody who'd been around that cottage sometime, that much was certain," he explained, "and nobody else the girl talked about fitted the looks of my hitchhiker. They were all too old or too young, except this one."

Over the phone the lieutenant asked a question, and Martin answered, "Why, Lieutenant, I knew he'd turn north, 'cause he had folks near Arcadia. Thought he might head there. And once he left his car, I knew I had plenty of time to catch him. He couldn't walk fast or far, not with the tight shoes he had."

He hung up. It had been an easy case. Just a lot of little things. Little things, and the rule—keep your eyes open and remember what you see. In this case, a hitch hiker without a thumb.



WOLF CHASE



*Two Legged or Four
Legged, a Wolf
Is a Wolf*

By **ROBERT E. PINKERTON**

Who Knows the North and Has Written Many Stories of Its Perilous Trails

I

WINTER struck with a vicious impact that awed Wiley Shaw. For two months he had found the wilderness entrancing. It possessed softness and color. It promised adventure and romance. Now it cooped him up with three others in a cabin built for two at the most. And one of the three was an ugly crook.

Wiley knew this when he first looked at the man. Al Kragen was tall and heavy, with dark skin and hair. His eyes were dark, shifty and suspicious. In five minutes he had shown that he lacked no trait of that scum which always fringes a frontier.

What troubled Wiley most was Neil Fraser's failure to recognize danger. Neil was gray and sixty and bent beneath many years of toil. He was mellow and wise and gentle and seemed a part of the wilderness in which he had spent a lifetime setting traps and snares and taking fur from them. He cooked and smiled at his guests.

"Guess it's for us to get in the wood, lad," Neil said to Wiley after supper. "These boys, dryin' out their socks, can stick by the fire."

Wiley followed him outside. He saw Neil feel of their snowshoes, hanging on pegs beneath the eaves, then stoop and set up four others lying beside the door.

The old trapper seemed to have difficulty. He dropped one, lurched as if slipping, and Wiley heard a crack when the frame snapped.

"I'm gettin' old!" Neil exclaimed, aghast. They went to the wood pile together.

"This man Kragen is dangerous," Wiley whispered.

"Shouldn't wonder," the trapper agreed. "I saw him once, when they was layin' steel west o' here. Tendin' bar in a blind pig. No guts for anything big, but he'd roll drunks, lift anything loose, and short change you if he could. Just small and dirty, for all his size."

"We can't leave him here tomorrow. He'd steal your fur."

"Not if he's liable to get caught."

They went in, arms heaped with wood.

"Another foot or two o' snow's comin'," Neil said.

"How far did you say to the railroad?" Al Kragen asked.

"I call it sixty, in miles," and the trapper placed a slight emphasis on the last two words.

"Two days," Kragen grunted. "We'll start in the morning."

"I never wore snowshoes until today," his companion said. "My feet and legs got pretty sore. Isn't there some other place where we can stop?"

"Nobody between here and steel," Neil answered.

"We can make it," Kragen snorted. "Man who can't walk thirty miles in a day is little account."

WORRY creased the round, smooth face of the fourth man. Wiley had liked Robin Ware from the first. Young, about Wiley's own age, blond, with wide blue eyes and a ready smile, he had a boyish quality that appealed instantly. Wiley could not understand how so decent a chap happened to be in the depths of the Canadian wilderness with a man like Kragen.

"I've got to get out!" Ware exclaimed. "Wife will be worrying. Didn't want me to come in the first place, but I thought I saw a good chance on the new road to the Bay."

"Then how you come along here?" Neil asked in surprise.

"A slide stopped the construction trains and we were away ahead of steel," Ware answered. "Thought I was trapped until I met Kragen. He was in a hurry to get out, too, and he suggested we paddle south. But rivers froze and this snow came."

"Worst fall I've seen in thirty years," Neil said.

"We've had a tough time," Ware went on. "Kragen had never camped or paddled before, and I hadn't. Just luck we found your place at dark tonight."

"Huh!" Kragen snorted. "Nothin' hard about it. We'd 'a' got out easy if ice and snow'd held off a couple more days."

"And we were out of grub," Robin Ware said.

"Workin' on the new road?" Neil asked.

"I'd have stood this trip better if I had been," Ware laughed. "In a store all my life. Eastern Ontario. Built up a good business and sold it to a chain. Then I saw an ad of a going concern on the new road to the Bay. Sounded like a chance to grow up with the country. Owner wrote he had to get out because of his health and wanted cash on the spot."

Ware chuckled, a bit ruefully. "The store was a log shack. A few Indians and construction men. No chance of a town for years, if ever. Three thousand dollars seemed cheap, until I saw the outfit. The man must have been a fool to think anybody'd buy that dump, let alone pay cash for it."

"Sounds like a frame-up," Wiley Shaw suggested.

"May be, but he didn't get *my* money."

Wiley moved back into a corner so that he could watch Kragen. He believed he was beginning to understand, but Neil changed the subject.

"You was wise to bring snowshoes," the trapper said.

"Just luck we found them yesterday," Ware answered.

"On Beaverhouse Lake?" Neil asked sharply.

"Someone had left them on a scaffold."

"Meanin' you robbed a cache?" and Neil's own blue eyes were like the blued finish of a new rifle barrel.

"I wondered about that, but Kragen —"

"If a man leaves stuff lyin' around, he can expect to lose it," Kragen sneered.

Ware was genuinely distressed by Neil's attitude. "But I put ten dollars in a can!" he protested.

"And no need to," Kragen scoffed. "It's a man's own fault if he leaves things loose."

Neil rose and opened the door, sniffed of the wind.

"I'm awfully sorry!" Ware exclaimed

to Wiley. "But the snow was so deep."

"A cache is sacred in the bush," Wiley explained from the depths of his two months' experience.

"It'll be snowin' by mornin'," Neil spoke from the door.

IT WAS, large flakes that promised a heavy fall on top of the two feet already down.

"We'll get goin'," Kragen said after breakfast.

Neil advised against it.

"Aw, we can shove through this," the man insisted in his boorish manner.

"No good resettin' traps today," Neil continued quietly. "Tomorrow we'll move to the south camp. Right on your way. Easier goin' the first ten miles and a place to sleep."

"Ten miles!" Kragen scoffed. "That might be your gait, old feller. "It ain't mine."

"You'll have to mend a snowshoe first," Neil said apologetically. "Forgot to tell you, but you left it in front of the door last night and I stepped on it."

Kragen leaped to his feet. "Those webs wasn't in front o' the door," he charged harshly.

"May be not," Neil admitted. "But a man who knows the bush watches his shoes. One fell across the step."

"Yeah?" and Kragen glanced swiftly from Neil to Wiley.

"I'll mend it for you," Neil said. "Besides, we're shy o' grub here. We've got a moose cached back a ways. Wiley and me'll get it today so you'll have some. And I'll bring a piece o' the hide. Make that web as good as ever for you tonight."

Kragen glowered at the old man. His big hands twitched.

"That is, if Wiley feels strong enough," Neil said with a grin at his young partner. "The lad came up to live with me for his health, but I ain't seen anything the matter with it."

"How far is this meat?" Kragen demanded suspiciously.

"Three-four miles. We'll be back by dark."

"And you've got another shack south o' here?"

"Ten miles. Trail's all cut out."

Suddenly Kragen became oily. "I see. You go from one shack to the other. Have two places."

"That's it," Neil agreed.

Wiley Shaw stared straight ahead, while his heart thumped. Neil Fraser had three camps. They had come the previous day from the headquarters cabin, ten miles to the east. It was the main supply house, the year around home. Neil's trap line formed a triangle, roughly, with over night cabins at the west and south points.

"We'll go to your place tomorrow," Kragen said. "Show it to me."

He took a map from his pack and learned not only where the south cabin was, but the best winter route to the railroad, the old trapper explaining in great detail. Kragen no longer sneered.

SNOW was coming down heavily when Neil and Wiley started for the moose meat.

"You broke that snowshoe deliberately!" Wiley exclaimed after a quarter of a mile.



"And you kept still about the main cabin."

"Kragen seemed too set on leavin' to-day," the trapper answered. "And he was askin' too many questions."

"Might steal your fur, eh?"

"Kragen ain't the sort that takes chances.

But when young Ware was showin' us the pictures of his wife and kiddie, he got 'em from a money belt under his shirt. Looked like he had quite a bit in it. And I knew Kragen."

"Ware expected to pay three thousand for that store," Wiley added excitedly.

"It was all mighty queer," Neil said. "Banks have checks and drafts. Then Kragen gettin' Ware to paddle two hundred miles when they could 'a' walked around the slide to a train. None of it made good sense."

"This is shaping up, Neil! Kragen was in with the man who advertised the store for sale. And they wanted a victim with cash."

"You read too many books, lad," Neil grinned. "Why does Kragen, who's lazy and never was in a canoe or on snowshoes before, want to make so rough a trip?"

"Provincial police on the Bay road are after him and he had to come out this way, or he saw a chance to double cross his partner and get this haul for himself. Perhaps both."

"Huh! May be somethin' in books. Looks like I was right in breakin' that snowshoe. It's sprung Kragen's trap for him. You get Ware off alone tonight and tell him. He's too fine a young feller to be robbed by a rat like Kragen."

They reached the cache of moose meat at noon and fried steaks for lunch. Snow still fell in big flakes when they started back, but the trail was broken now and walking comparatively easy. Wiley's "eyes were stronger than his back," as Neil had warned, and he took too large a burden. He was tired when they reached the lake just before sunset. Neil, in the lead, suddenly slipped free from his pack and ran forward.

Wiley, puzzled, plodded on. Thickly falling snow hid the clearing, but as he came closer he saw a huge, black hole, and smoke fighting its way upward among the lazy flakes.

II

THEY didn't like it, our taking those snowshoes on Beaverhouse Lake," Robin Ware had said after Neil Fraser

and Wiley Shaw had departed for the cache of moose meat.

"No loss to them, was it?" Al Kragen retorted. "And didn't we need the webs? How'd we 'a' gotten out? Suppose you'd 'a' sat there and starved."

Kragen's tone was ugly. It had grown increasingly so since they had left the right of way a hundred and fifty miles to the north two weeks earlier. Robin Ware had ascribed this to the hardships and difficulties of the journey, but now when they were in a safe warm place, he saw no reason for surliness.

"He's a fine old chap, this Fraser, and he's been mighty decent to us," Ware said with a touch of reproof. "I like to be square and to have people know I am. I'll ask Fraser tonight if he'll take us out to steel. Pay him, of course. And then I'll send those snowshoes back and have him put them in the cache."

Kragen whirled from the little window, where he had been watching Neil and Wiley disappear in the forest.

"What you mean, hiring Fraser?" he demanded.

"Just that. He knows the bush and how to travel in winter. We had a tough time yesterday."

"Meanin' you did," Kragen scoffed. "What's hard about it? We don't need any help. I've been around a lot, construction camps and all that, and these old timers with their talk o' the bush being tough give me a pain. They'll tell you how an Indian does things, but I never saw the dirty nitchie yet that knew as much about anything as I do. Why should they? Never was a white man yet who couldn't beat an Indian."

For all his good nature, Robin Ware was not soft.

"Listen, Al," he said in a tone the other had never heard him use before, "I've decided this thing. You can do as you please. Start now if you wish. But tonight I'll ask Fraser to take me out to the railroad."

"You're crazy!" Kragen flared. "He'll charge you a lot and do nothin' to earn it.

Stick to me and you'll be out in two days."

"We didn't come so far yesterday."

"Just gettin' used to the webs. I know 'em now. We can hit right through. Thirty miles a day is nothin'."

"I'll talk to Fraser," Robin Ware said, and he picked up one of Wiley Shaw's books and began to read.

Al Kragen paced about the tiny cabin, muttering, occasionally making derisive comments about Neil Fraser and woodsmanship. Later he went out and examined the snowshoes. The one Neil had broken was useless until repaired.

When he returned, Ware did not look up. Kragen stood behind him and studied the cabin. Two rifles were in a corner. Quietly he examined them. Both were loaded. Extra shells for each lay on a shelf.

Kragen went on to the food supplies. These were not plentiful. He opened cans and cloth sacks. The unusually early fall and winter must have caught Neil Fraser unprepared. A little flour, a few pounds of beans, sugar, tea and a slab of bacon comprised the stores. Fresh meat had been exhausted at breakfast.

ROBIN WARE cooked lunch. He knew little of pots and pans and it was not much of a meal. Kragen lay on a bunk and jabbed at the logs with a knife. Later he complained of the food.

"Look here, Al," Ware said. "I paid for that canoe. I bought the blankets and camp outfit and grub. I've done more than my share of the work. You might remember that, especially as you're not much of a cook yourself."

"So that's why you want Fraser to take you out?" Kragen snarled.

"No. I want to be sure to get there as quickly as possible. It will be a tough trip, with this snow falling."

"We'd 'a' been half way today if that old fool hadn't stepped on your snowshoe."

"You're in no bigger a hurry than I am, Al," Ware said reasonably. "My wife's

worrying, and I don't like to have that with a baby coming next month. I only want to make our getting out certain."

"I'm sick o' hearin' about your wife!" Kragen snarled. "And I'm no good, eh? Goin' to drop me and hook up with an old clod who's got one foot in the grave, are you?"

He concluded with a string of epithets that brought Robin Ware, startled and angry, to his feet. Kragen, too, leaped up.

"You can't say that to me!" Ware exclaimed.

His relations with men had invariably been friendly. He had no guile, and he was too ingenuous to recognize it in others. Nor did he have the perception or experience to understand that Al Kragen was whipping himself into the fury that alone would permit action.

Kragen repeated the names he had called Ware, and added others. He heaped abuse upon his companion until that astounded young man, suddenly cool, said, "You talk like a dirty cur."

Kragen's synthetic rage had been waiting for something to drive it past reason. The contempt in Robin Ware's voice accomplished this. A fresh, heedless burst of mad fury came, and Kragen smashed the other in the face.

"Ditch me, would you? Gyp me out o' that fat roll! No little rat can do that to me!"

Robin Ware staggered back against the wall, slightly stunned and completely bewildered by this savage attack. But Ware had courage aplenty, and he charged back at the bigger man.

Al Kragen was big and strong enough, and now his inherent cowardice had been anaesthetized by trumped up rage. His heavy fists crashed through to Ware's face again and again, and with each blow his fury mounted.

Ware could not stand against it. Kragen, winning, unhurt, became a devastating berserker. He did not even stoop to bar-room tricks. He simply smashed, smashed,

smashed, until Ware slumped to the floor unconscious.

Kragen's false fury carried him further. He grasped a stick of stove wood and beat the inert man's head until the blond hair was red with blood and the face a raw mass.

At last, breathless, snarling, he drew back.

"Double-cross me, will you?" he shouted. "What you suppose I killed myself comin' through the bush with you for? And may be I haven't earned this!"

He jerked open Ware's shirt and unbuckled the money belt. One compartment, fat with bank notes, was quickly opened, and a glimpse showed large denominations. Kragen fastened the belt about his own waist, beneath his shirt.

This done, he acted swiftly. He folded his heavy blanket and stuffed it into a packsack, placed all the food with it. He emptied one rifle, smashed trigger guard and hammer with an ax, and set the other, a shell in the barrel, at the door.

"Like to see 'em follow me!" he laughed. "The old feller ain't that big a fool."

Kragen brought in dry stove wood, split some kindling, soaked all with kerosene from the lamp, and started a fire in the middle of the floor.

"Shack's dry enough to burn good," he chuckled with a glance at the logs he had tested with a knife. "Guess that's all I got to do here."

The fire was blazing well. He tumbled the table and two benches onto it, and flames mounted higher. The low pole roof began to smoke. Kragen went outside, tossed Ware's snowshoes into the fire, took his own webs and retreated a few feet.

He stood there watching the flames. The little cabin was old and dry. The interior was soon an inferno. After a while, Kragen slipped on his snowshoes, shouldered the pack, tucked the rifle under an arm, and started south. When he turned to look back, thickly falling snow curtained cabin, fire and smoke.

KRAGEN grinned as he strode on. He was big, had much physical strength, and he made little of the severe labor of breaking trail in two feet of snow. The webs sank deep under his weight but he jerked them up, thrust them forward, crashed ahead by sheer force.

Neil Fraser's trapping trails were well brushed out and blazed. Neil spent summers doing that so his winter work might be easier, and now, despite the heavy snowstorm, Al Kragen had little difficulty in following the route.

But he began to tire. Even on good trails, seasoned wilderness travelers stop periodically for a smoke. Kragen, confident, scorned a rest.

And, inexperienced, he accepted effort as accomplishment. Because he had worked hard, he believed he had put much trail behind him. Snow fell so thickly he could never see far and thus judge distances.

But his synthetic rage began to wear off. He had never planned murder. Neil Fraser was to blame for that. If the old fool hadn't broken the snowshoe, Robin Ware could have started south. There would have been several safer methods of getting the money belt before they reached steel.

Remorse, or even apprehension, did not come, however. Only irritation because the trail twisted and turned. Kragen had no fear of pursuit. He had been too clever for that. Fraser was old and incapable of fast travel. Wiley Shaw was a green young squirt. And they were without weapons, without food, without blankets. They would not dare follow an armed man. And if the fire did its work properly they might not even suspect Robin Ware was dead.

Kragen gloated over the way he had stacked the cards. By the end of the second day he would have reached the railroad, and he knew what to do then. It would be a tough trip—he was beginning to see that—puffing and sweating already, and the pack straps cutting his shoulders. But he felt confident he had come ten

miles. Fraser was probably lying about distances. Or did not know.

Darkness came, but no cabin. Kragen knew he was on the trail, but in the night and thick snow he might lose it. And there was a possibility Fraser and Shaw would follow, hoping to find food and shelter in the south cabin. If they got close to him in the darkness, they might cause trouble.

Kragen turned off in a cedar swamp. The thick branches of a large tree held most of the snow that had fallen and beneath it, close to the trunk, the ground was almost bare. He crawled into the retreat, started a small fire with twigs and toasted a chunk of bacon on a stick. That, and half a loaf of sour dough bread, all he could find in the west cabin, comprised his meal.

When the bacon was cooked, Kragen let the fire go out. The old trapper might smell smoke or see the blaze if he should come. The blanket was pulled out and wrapped over heavy mackinaw coat and cap. The rifle was held beneath it, across his legs. Kragen grinned. They had better not follow him.

Snow fell heavily all night, but he was well protected. The temperature was not low, yet his clothes had been soaked by sweat and now became clammy. He shivered, slept fitfully, and was pleased. If he were too comfortable he might be caught off guard.

BEFORE dawn he started another fire, toasted more bacon, finished the bread. He would have a good meal when he reached Neil Fraser's south cabin.

The heavy travel warned him quickly and he thrust his webs forward with the same energy and power of the previous day's start. Yet the cabin did not appear. He was on the trapping trail still. Blazes, cuttings and high mounds of snow over Neil's cuddies proved that. Kragen, tiring, began to curse the old trapper as a liar or a fool who wouldn't know a mile even if a surveyor showed it to him. He was

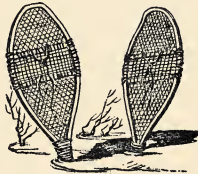
getting worried when at last he found himself suddenly at the cabin door.

"Ten miles!" he jeered. "It's twenty-five if a foot."

Kragen started a fire in the stove, set snow to melting for tea water. The cabin was even smaller than the one he had burned. Its food supply was far less. Neil had planned to stock both places by canoe, but the early freeze-up had balked him.

"Guess they was goin' to eat moose meat all winter," Kragen muttered as he sliced bacon.

He kept the rifle handy, glanced often through the one small window while he cooked and ate a meal. When he had



finished he took a second blanket from a bunk, all the food supplies, a bundle of prime mink skins that hung in a corner, and kicked over the stove. The lamp, smashed on the floor, splattered its kerosene and flames leaped high. When Kragen went out he left the door open.

"Give it a good draft," he chuckled. "And maybe that don't cook their goose."

He slipped into his snowshoes, shouldered his pack, picked up the rifle and started south. Again thickly falling flakes curtained a roaring blaze.

III

NEIL FRASER was poking at the smoking ruins with a long pole when Wiley Shaw rushed up beside him.

"There's Ware," Neil said between clenched teeth. "What's left o' him."

"Ware!" Wiley repeated without comprehension.

"I never thought Kragen had the guts."

Suddenly Wiley Shaw knew, and the needless horror of it aroused him as he never had been before. Three times he had seen death come violently, but never murder. Words jerked from him, curses, broken sentences, a wild denunciation of Al Kragen.

"We'll run him down," he shouted. "I want only one shot at him!"

"What with?" Neil asked, and he poked at what looked like an iron bar.

"Kragen took the other rifle," he added.

"Then if we follow him we're helpless!"

"He's got a gun, we haven't," Neil said.

"But Ware was such a decent chap," Wiley protested. "And his wife waiting—needing that money! It's so damnably unjust, having Kragen get away with this."

Neil was silent a long time.

"May be Kragen won't," he said at last in a husky voice.

"But with a rifle! And hours' start!"

"He's still got the bush to beat."

"What are you driving at?"

"We've a chance to see Kragen hung—*or as good.*"

A new quality was in Neil's voice. Always he was calm and assured. Now a quiet force brought conviction because it was backed by an undercurrent of passion.

"Men always think they can beat the bush," he continued. "A good man can tie it, if he knows how. Kragen don't know. Let's get going."

The sun had set before they started with lightened loads, and the thickly falling snow brought quick darkness. Headquarters camp lay ten miles east. They had broken the trail the previous day but the new storm was filling it. As the night wore on the going became increasingly difficult, their burdens of meat heavier, the aches in their legs greater. They seldom spoke. It was ten o'clock before they reached the cabin.

Neil fried steak and thawed out a loaf

of sour dough bread. Wiley watched him, his face still stiff with horror.

"We're responsible for Ware's death!" he suddenly burst out. "We shouldn't have left him!"

"It was just luck they found our cabin last night," Neil answered. "And how was we to know?"

"Then Kragen must have planned from the first to kill Ware, just before they reached the railroad."

"Or leave him in the bush. But last night and this morning Kragen got suspicious. Or Ware did. No way to tell if they had a fight."

Wiley brightened. "That's probably it."

"And they were out o' grub," Neil continued. "Kragen saw we didn't have much at the west camp. He knew we didn't have rifles with us and by burnin' one and takin' the other, he figured we wouldn't dare follow him. No, lad, we're not to blame. Kragen, in his dumb way, thought he saw a chance to get the money and leave the blame on us, if what's left o' Ware is found in our cabin."

"And we can't stop him!"

"No," the trapper said slowly, "*we* can't. But the bush has a lot o' rules and regulations, and sure answers to mistakes. Kragen don't know any of either. We'll trail along and see what happens."

AFTER the meal was eaten, Neil covered the stove with kettles and set navy beans to boil. He cut much salt pork into small cubes and put them in the beans.

"And I've got thirty pounds o' cooked beans and pork frozen in the shed," he remarked. "Never know when you'll have to make a quick trip in winter."

Neil made comments like this as he worked but he refused to discuss Kragen further. He laid out Wiley's down robe, his own quilted rabbitskin, and extra socks for each. A can of matches, a pound of tea, five pounds of sugar and a can of coffee were set aside.

"Grub counts most," Neil said. "A man can stand a lot if he's fed right. When

this snow stops it'll turn too cold for cookin' in the open."

He sharpened two axes, then brought in half the hind leg of a moose and sliced large steaks off the round. When the beans were soft and nearly dry, he stirred much brown sugar into each kettle, watched them carefully lest they burn, and then took them from the stove.

"Put on all the fry pans and start the steak, lad," he said as he opened the door and laid a large sheet of canvas on the snow. Onto this he poured the beans, spreading them in a thin, steaming layer. An old tent stretched over a pole kept off the falling snow.

Except for Neil's absent minded comments on what he was doing, or a direction to Wiley, they spoke little. As soon as a pan of steak was fried it was laid on stretcher boards and set outside to freeze. The fat was poured over it and quickly formed a white, solid layer.

All this required much time and it was three o'clock before the beans and steak were solidly frozen and placed in canvas bags. The beans were as hard as before being cooked, but bigger, and each was free and coated with pork fat and sugar.

Despite his faith in Neil Fraser, Wiley was maddened by these careful preparations. A cheap, cowardly murderer was putting miles between them every hour, while Neil guarded his stomach. Wiley wanted to be after him. Kragen now had nearly a day's start. Wiley pictured him, big and strong, traveling fast and long hours. A day seemed a hopeless handicap in a race of only sixty miles.

Wiley voiced this thought. Neil did not look up.

"We'll get some sleep now," he said simply.

The old trapper wakened with the late dawn.

"Still snowin' hard," he said when Wiley arose.

"Neil!" Wiley protested. "We've done nothing about his being armed."

"Nothing *we* can do," was the curt reply.

After a quick breakfast, Neil brought in his toboggan. It was small, only ten inches wide and six feet long, but when the canvas sheet on which the beans had been frozen was spread upon it, and their robes, spare articles and sacks of food laid on top, Neil drew the canvas cover tightly over all, lashed it down and had a snug load with room to spare.

"They say a man can drag his weight, but that depends on the trail," Neil commented. "I've hauled two-fifty, and seen a time when a hundred pounds pulled my cork. Guess we're ready."

THEY went out into the storm. Big flakes floated down. The splitting block wore a shako eighteen inches high. Snow lay like an immense and immaculate, and oppressive, blanket over the land. It was now nearly three feet deep, and when Neil led the way his webs sank half that depth. Wiley followed, a wide leather band across the back of his neck and the traces leading under his arms to the toboggan.

Neil's snowshoes did not crush down a complete trail. Wiley stepped where Neil had not, thus leaving a fairly level path for the toboggan. The load was heavy but the snow was not harsh and dragging. After a quarter of a mile they changed places.

Immediately the unnatural step had its effect on Wiley. It was necessary to lift a web straight up eighteen inches, until it had cleared the surface, then thrust it ahead, throw the weight upon it and let it sink. Short steps were impossible, for the leading web must be set down ahead of the other. The snow was soft and fluffy and much of it gathered on top of the webbing. Each shoe, with its load, weighed five or six pounds.

One hundred yards of this, and Wiley stopped to rest. He did not wish to, but he felt he could not go on. He was breathing heavily. His hands were so warm he slipped them from the mittens. Excruciating pain shot through the muscles along his shins.

But the needless cruelty of Ware's murder inflamed him. Ware had been such an open hearted, straightforward chap. Wiley pushed on.

Just before noon he recognized a bend in the trail around an outcropping of rock, the place where Neil had taken the first mink of the season.

"We'll never catch Kragen!" Wiley exclaimed in consternation. "We've come only three miles."

Neil chuckled harshly between grunts as he tugged at the traces.

"And Kragen had a day's start!" Wiley insisted.

"In this kind o' going?" the trapper countered. "The doc was right. It was nerves, not health, that sent you to the bush."

They stopped for lunch, beans and steak and scalding tea. Wiley felt vastly stronger when they pushed on.

Snow fell as thickly as ever. Each hour it became deeper, each hour the going more difficult. The familiar blackness of the forest was covered. Saplings were rounded hummocks. Spruce and jackpine branches sagged low beneath the burden.

And all the time weariness and pain grew. Wiley kept at it doggedly. He was still inflamed by the horror of Robin Ware's murder, but even that stimulus could no longer prevail against the aches and leaden feeling in his legs.

"Anyhow, we can make the south cabin tonight and have a warm bed," he said when the sun set.

"Think Kragen'll figure to leave grub and blankets and a tight roof for us?" Neil scoffed. "We'll camp here."

Wiley Shaw was dead tired. His exertions had melted snow on the back of his canvas parka. Even as he stood there, a chill swept through his weary body.

He looked about. Trees, brush, ground, windfalls—everything was buried. And still the big flakes came floating down, so thickly that now, in the gathering dusk, he could see only a few yards. And in that white smother, without shelter, they were

to cook and eat and sleep. Wiley shivered as Neil turned off the trail.

IV

TWO hours after he had burned the south cabin, Al Kragen first noticed the pink snow on top of his right foot. He stared at it in amazement, for he had not felt anything more than a slight chafing. His shins ached excruciatingly. Perhaps this had not let a minor pain through.

He brushed the snow off his shoe-pace with a mitten and saw blood oozing through a ripped seam just back of the big toe. He flexed the foot but could not feel that he was injured.

Kragen went on. The blood troubled him. The snow was getting deeper all the time, and he found that he could not crush through it as when he had started. Also, he had studied the map when eating lunch in the cabin, site of which Neil Fraser had marked with a cross, and reference to the scale seemed to show the trapper had been right about the ten miles.

"Lazy surveyors," Kragen had muttered then. "Guessed at most o' this country. I know I've come farther than that."

As the afternoon wore on and weariness came, his pace slowed. Kragen feared this might be true, but the storm restricted his view. He could not estimate that a point on a lake was a mile away and learn how much time was spent in reaching it. He traveled always in a small, dim, crawling circle, and the speed with which that circle progressed was a matter of his own vain estimate.

The man kept on with a certain doggedness. He stung to revival the fury with which he had attacked Robin Ware. He worked up fresh rage against Neil Fraser. He felt, somehow, that Neil had precipitated the crisis. And anger seemed to dull pain and growing weariness.

But hunger pangs were added. His last three meals had not been satisfying. There was no bread in the south cabin and as he began to consider supper he saw that he

would have to bake a bannock or boil beans.

Making camp did not offer a problem. He had been fairly comfortable under the cedar the first night. And he could have a fire now, a big one. He was perfectly confident Neil and Wiley would not pursue. They were without firearms.

His rifle was gaining alarmingly in weight, however. So was his pack. The mink skins had seemed light. An extra blanket was nothing. And he had little food. Yet the pack dragged more and more, and the shoulder straps cut deeper.

Then early darkness caught him unawares. It seemed to have crept up with just a suggestion of dusk, and then a grayish blackness engulfed him. At the time, Kragen was crossing a portage through a wide *brulee* overgrown with poplar saplings, now leafless. The area had a barren, desolate aspect. He kept on for what he believed to be two miles, and suddenly was seized with panic. He must be lost. Kragen remembered distinctly how Neil Fraser had described this portage when explaining the



map. It was a mile long, the trapper had said, but the trail was plain. Kragen knew he had traveled far more than a mile, and he had the good sense to stop where he was.

But there was no big cedar tree, no thick growth to give shelter from the endless fall of the big, silent flakes. More than three feet now covered everything. Kragen cut several of the poplar saplings. All were green. No other fuel was in sight.

He went on a little way and saw a small clump of spruce saplings. As he plowed toward it he caught the toe of a web under a windfall and fell.

Between heavy pack, deep snow and tangled snowshoes, he had difficulty in getting up. On his feet at last, he discovered the windfall, a balsam, was dry.

Kragen was hungry. When he fell, snow had worked up his sleeves, into his mittens and down his neck. He had worn his heavy mackinaw coat all day and his underclothing was damp with perspiration. Now, as he stood there, inactive, he began to shiver. His one thought was of fire and food.

He chopped slivers and larger pieces from the windfall. Half of them fell into the deep, soft snow and were lost, but he finally gathered enough to build a fire where his feet had partly tramped down the snow. After the eighth match, he got a feeble blaze going.

Its light showed the spruce saplings, heaped high with snow. They seemed to offer some sort of protection and he carried several blazing sticks to them and started a new fire. When it was going nicely he straightened, stepped back. An arm struck a spruce. Its heavy burden descended like an avalanche. The fire was buried. Kragen stood in complete darkness, cursing. For the first time his tone was not wholly arrogant. Doubt, and a touch of fear, had crept in.

Kragen got another fire going near the spruce. As he put on more wood, the fire melted its way down. Fuel was not easily obtained. Kragen found it only by wading about, hip deep, and striking windfalls with his feet. When he returned with an armful, his feeble blaze was on the ground, at the bottom of a round hole in the snow.

When he put on more wood, smoke rolled out of the hole. The flames showed the big flakes falling ceaselessly. Kragen's woolen clothing was covered with them. When he got close to the fire, the snow melted and big drops of water formed on coat and trousers.

But he was interested in food. Never had he been so hungry. He melted snow in the frying pan, mixed in flour, attempted to bake the dough. That next to the un-

greased pan quickly began to burn. That on top remained uncooked.

After ten minutes, Kragen attempted to cut the smoking loaf. He dug and scraped. The outside, when he had loosened a piece, was burned black. Its taste was acrid. The center and top were still raw, barely warmed through. Hunger drove him to eat the entire mass.

While he did so, the fire burned out. The fuel was gone. After he had collected more in the darkness, he cut bacon in thick slices and fried it. But he had not cleaned the pan. The fat burned and smoked. The bacon charred. He ate that, too, black cinders outside, raw within. When the pan cooled a little he drank the bitter grease.

He was still hungry. Again his fire burned out. And there was no more fuel.

THAT night Al Kragen learned new truths about the capacity of the human body to suffer and still survive. He knew he suffered. He did suffer. His whole frame ached. He was exhausted, hungry. His clothing was damp inside and out. An overpowering drowsiness possessed him. After the fourth fire had burned to ashes, he took the blankets from the pack, wrapped the thick wool about him, over his snow covered coat and cap, and sat down on the pack.

Thus he spent the night. The temperature was not low enough to freeze him. He was in no danger of death. But he moaned as he dozed. Fits of shivering often wakened him. His wracked body became more cramped from his huddled position. When he lifted his head he felt the big flakes strike his face.

Toward morning he roused himself. He was famished now, and knew a hard day lay ahead. He gathered more fuel, built a fire. Its first light showed snow still falling, the blankets covered with it, his damp coat newly sprinkled.

His bannock was no more successful. He boiled much tea, which warmed him as the fire had not. In the first dawn he shook the snow from his outfit as best he could,

stuffed the damp blankets into the pack-sack, found his snowshoes, started on.

At once he knew why blood had oozed through his shoepac. The frozen thongs of the webs were like searing bands across the tops of his feet. But immediately the fierce pains in his shin muscles proved a counter irritant. Even that was forgotten when he remembered he was lost.

Kragen was not lost, however. At dawn the storm thinned for a few minutes. Less than a hundred yards ahead was the lake he had been seeking. It was unmistakable. Two small islands lay just off the end of the portage, as Neil had described the place.

He plowed on to the lake. The west shore was covered with thick, green timber. Large spruce trees offered shelter. Fuel was plentiful. All this just a few steps beyond where he had spent the night.

Snow began to fall again, as heavily as during the last two days. It curtained the little islands, the green timber. Once more Kragen's world became white and silent and small. It was soft, rounded, did not seem to carry a threat. But the man glared at it with savage hatred.

V

WILEY SHAW, facing his first night in the winter woods, could think only of the home cabin's snug protection. His two months in the wilderness had developed an intense admiration for Neil Fraser's skill and knowledge, yet he did not see how even Neil could achieve comfort in three feet of snow, with more coming down so heavily. And Wiley was cold, tired and hopeless.

But he had formed a habit of taking over a task that Neil started, doing it as best he could. Neil liked that quality in him and now, when the trapper began digging with a snowshoe, Wiley shook off his weariness and went to work. After a word of direction, Neil turned to gathering spruce boughs.

When Wiley had cleared a space six by ten feet, down to the ground, Neil

dragged the toboggan to it, unlashed the load and stretched the canvas sheet over poles he had erected. It sloped at an angle of forty-five degrees, and above it Neil laid a thatch of long spruce saplings. He thrust boughs into the high banks of snow at the sides and, as darkness came, Wiley saw they had a snug retreat, heavily bedded with boughs.

Fuel was gathered and a fire started at the open end of the shelter. The bright blaze lighted the interior and permitted Wiley to cut more fuel nearby. Neil cooked supper. Snow was melted for tea water, frozen beans heated in one fry pan, steak in another. They were eating less than an hour after stopping.

To Wiley Shaw, the well cooked food and snug retreat were something of a miracle. The shelter protected them from falling snow, the bough bed from the cold ground. Their damp canvas parkas were removed only after the fire was started and now hung to dry. Comfort was enhanced by the very contrast of this ease and the close pressing Northland.

After eating, they smoked and watched snow falling into the light of the fire. Fed, rested, Wiley again began straining at the leash. He could not believe this slow progress would result in capture of the murderer. He had expected the pursuit to be swifter, to possess dramatic elements, possibly to end in the gratifying thrill of personal combat.

But when Wiley urged the necessity of haste, Neil was unimpressed.

"He's got a rifle against our two axes," the trapper said shortly.

Snow fell all night. Ashes of the camp fire were covered in the morning. Neil got a blaze started while Wiley was still asleep and long before there was a sign of dawn he cooked breakfast. But when it was eaten, Neil curbed Wiley's impatience.

"Kragen learned something that first day," the trapper said. "He might stay at the south camp until this snow stops."

"Then we'll walk right into his rifle!"
"We might."

They packed up and started before dawn. Wiley found that his feet were sore from the snowshoe thongs and that his lower legs ached from the unaccustomed labor and gait. Neil plodded on as usual. If his legs ached or his feet burned, he gave no sign.

An hour after dawn, Neil stopped. Wiley recognized a landmark and knew they were within a quarter of a mile of the south camp.

"I'll make a circle," Neil said.

He disappeared in the forest. Snow fell thickly. Spruce branches bent low beneath the burden. Windfalls, hummocks of moss, ground growth, inequalities in the familiar trail—all had disappeared under the white blanket.

Wiley had passed on that trail several times before the first heavy snow. He had liked it then with its aroma of the forest and spots of fall color. It had possessed all the imagined lure of the Northland and had spelled the romance and adventure of trapping and hunting, of a free life in a vast wilderness.

Now, with the world an ominous, oppressive white, the trail became as wholly unfamiliar as the land itself. Not only Kragen but winter had altered the aspect and the very spirit of the North. Suddenly the forest was grim, sinister, inexorable.

Wiley waited. Snow covered the toboggan. It softened, then hid, the fine cameo tracery of his snowshoe tracks. Half an hour passed. Neil did not return. The big flakes floated down to thicken the silence. Wiley Shaw heard the thump of his own heart and knew what it was to be alone in such a desolate land.

Neil shouted. He was waiting at the site of the cabin. A hole in deep snow marked the place. One spiral of smoke lifted among the falling flakes.

"Stopped only long enough to set it afire," Neil said harshly. "About noon yesterday. I had a good bunch o' fur here, besides the work o' building."

"The worst of it is, you can't make him pay," Wiley said hotly.

"Not in money," was the grim reply.

Later Neil said, "And he thinks he's left us without grub or blankets. How's a man get to be like that, lad?"

HE LED the way south. The going was easier now. Kragen had partly broken the trail, though much snow had fallen since his passing. This made the trail appear as a succession of long holes in two rows, their edges and bottoms rounded. Neil stepped where Kragen had not, Wiley where Kragen had, and thus a fairly smooth path was made for the toboggan. Behind them the trail was a deep trough in the snow.

But progress was still slow and travel heavy. Wiley could not rid his mind of Kragen's boasts of thirty miles a day, or of the man's start of twenty-four hours. A day seemed unsurmountable in sixty miles.

Neil plodded steadily, taking his turn at breaking trail or pulling the toboggan. In mid-afternoon the snowfall thinned. By sunset it had ceased entirely, and at that moment they found where Kragen had stopped to camp in the *brulee*. Neil studied the site for some time and at last permitted himself a grin.

To Wiley it meant nothing, rounded holes and hollows near a spruce thicket.

They went on, to stop in the green timber by the lake. The sky was cloudy but no snow fell during the night. After they started the next morning the sun came out, though the temperature dropped sharply. Only six inches of snow lay on Kragen's tracks now, and each hour their progress became easier.

Yet Neil refused to hurry. He halted frequently to study places where Kragen had rested. He scarcely spoke all day.

This was not what Wiley considered a proper pursuit. Minutes were precious to the younger man. For the first time since he had entered the wilderness he seriously

doubted his idol. After all, Neil Fraser was a gentle soul. Perhaps he did not have the courage for this deadlier game.

Wiley's own plan, the only one he saw as being possible, was to get close to Kragen, then cut around him in the night and so reach the railroad first and summon the provincial police. Neil had said the larger, deeper lakes, such as Caribou, would not freeze until after the snowstorm. Swift travel would be possible on new ice and Neil's knowledge of the country would permit them to outdistance Kragen.

Such a plan would require constant pressing, however, and Neil would not hurry. He continued to study places where Kragen had paused to rest, and these became more and more frequent. Generally the man had stood still, but later he had often turned aside, knocked the snow from a windfall and sat down.

"Pretty soon we'll hit his third camp," Neil said.

Only an inch of snow now lay on the prints of Kragen's webs. At four o'clock



they found where he had stopped for the night.

"We're still a day behind him!" Wiley exclaimed hopelessly.

Neil remained the interested student of tracks.

"Kragen quit early," he finally said. "All in, too."

No snow lay on this camp site. To Wiley, it was a strange arrangement, so unlike their own snug nests. Snow had not been shoveled away but a few spruce boughs had been laid on top of it, and on these Kragen had slept.

Neil stooped over this thin bough bed and lifted a branch.

"He slept wet last night," the trapper commented. "Stopped just before it quit snowin'. Too lazy or didn't know enough to shovel snow away. Cut a few branches and sat on 'em while he tried to cook supper. Fire just dropped away from him. Knocked snow onto his bed before he spread his blankets, and then his body melted the snow. By mornin' the blanket was froze to this ice and branch. See the wool shreds?"

"How could he cook in that deep hole?" Wiley asked.

"Must 'a' gone to bed hungry." Neil fished a frozen mass of dough from the snow. "This bannock didn't do him any good. He tried to boil beans and they didn't even get soft. Here's some. His feet were wet, too. Shoepacs are a poor rig in this snow."

Neil made a circle of the camp and examined windfalls where Kragen had been cutting.

"Ax dull," he commented. "Couldn't use a good one anyhow. Didn't know enough to have camp close to fire wood."

No snow had fallen on Kragen's tracks as they went south from his third over-night stop.

"We can hurry now!" Wiley exclaimed impatiently.

"Kragen will wait," Neil said.

VI

THEY stopped for their own third camp just before dark. Neil admitted they were only twenty-eight miles from the home cabin.

"After three days!" Wiley protested angrily. "If we hurry we can get around

him, travel at night, reach the railroad and notify the police."

"I'm too old for foot racin'," Neil said.

They made camp as during the snow-storm. When the snow had been dug away it formed banks nearly head high on three sides. The fire was built across the opening, small at first for heating beans and steak and boiling tea, then larger to warm them and dry their clothes of frost.

The temperature had dropped below zero, but Wiley found he was very comfortable. He awakened early to hear what he felt certain was a rifle shot and sat up in alarm. The cold stung his face. A sharp crack came again, then one so close he leaped from his bed. Neil lifted his head.

"Trees snappin' in the frost," he said. "Pretty cold when they do that. Better take another snooze."

The fusillade continued and Wiley could not sleep. The air made his nostrils tingle. After a while he arose to start a fire. His hands became numb as he gathered wood. His fingers could scarcely grip a match. His body shivered so violently the first lighted match dropped into the snow. When at last a tiny blaze started, it died suddenly, completely, inexplicably. Wiley crawled back into his robe and lay shivering.

"And you know more'n Kragen," Neil said. "He'll be tryin' to start his own fire about now. How you think he'll make out?"

Neil donned a pair of socks he had kept warm and dry next his body, laced on his moccasins and stood up. From within his robe he drew some birch bark and a few sticks of kindling, and in a moment the flames were leaping high. In ten minutes more a hot breakfast was ready.

Wiley took his cue from Neil, who had cooked with mittened hands, and ate with his own covered. A cup of coffee, hot from the fire, became cold while he wrestled with a tough piece of steak.

"We'll have three-four days like this,"

Neil said. "It's not bad when you have plenty o' beans and pork. What you think about Kragen now?"

"How do you mean?"

"You've just had all the hot grub you could eat," Neil said. "No time or trouble to cook it, either. You slept warm. Your robe and clothes are dry. Been just about as comfortable as if you was in a cabin. But Kragen! I'll bet you, lad, he didn't sleep fifteen minutes at a stretch last night without wakin' up shiverin'. That's no rest after a hard day's work."

Neil filled a second pipe. Wiley did not comment. He was beginning to understand.

"You burn up a lot o' grub breakin' trail in more'n three feet o' snow," the trapper continued. "Need something you can cook quick and easy. Kragen's got a little bacon, flour and beans. He might bake a bannock if he wasn't shiverin' so he'd shake it out o' the pan into the fire. It takes a long time to boil beans so they're fit to eat. And the worst part o' the trip's still ahead. It gets mighty cold after a big snow. Probably hit thirty-five below tomorrow mornin'."

They started an hour before dawn. The cold burned Wiley's face and seared his nostrils. The toboggan pulled as if on sand. Smoke flowed from their noses and became a growing layer of frost on backs and shoulders.

Wiley's feet had been growing increasingly sore from the snowshoe thongs and the muscles of his lower legs ached excruciatingly. Now, with the trail half broken, it was no longer necessary to lift the webs high, and his legs ached less. But the thongs became steel bands in the intense cold and soon blood began to tint the snow on his moccasins below the insteps.

"And Kragen's breaking trail every foot of the way," Neil commented. "No one to spell him like we do or a trail half broke, like we got. And he's got a pack on his back. We'll hit his fourth camp pretty soon."

PLACES where Kragen had stopped to rest were becoming more frequent. At noon they were only fifty yards apart. The snow was as deep as ever. Always it lay before the man, soft and thick, beautiful and maddening, a deadly barrier penetrable only at the cost of excessive toil and pain and exhaustion.

And still the cold struck down. Trees cracked. Once Wiley heard a cannon roar off to the left.

"Ice," Neil explained as the long rumble died. "How'd you like to be here alone, lad?"

Wiley understood. The wilderness that had entranced him when he entered it in late summer was now a sinister force. He felt safe with Neil. He would feel reasonably safe alone in a cabin well stocked with food. But here, in this lifeless waste—he suddenly realized that he had not seen the track of an animal since the snow began—the whole force of the North struck him. The intense cold, the desolation, the crushing toil that deep snow imposed, the crawling progress, all combined, Wiley saw, to torture a man's body and harrow his spirit.

They came to Kragen's fourth camp, dreary and revealing—a few branches on the snow crushed beneath a man's weight, a hole through which fire had melted its way to the ground. Wiley remembered his own numb fingers that morning and his ineffectual attempts to start a blaze after rising from a warm bed.

"Sat up all night," Neil said. "Put his feet down in that hole to keep 'em warm. That'd ruin his shoe-pacs. Not much of a fire, either."

Wiley saw a bit of wool in the snow and drew out a heavy sock. The foot was stiff and red with blood.

"Feet cut," Neil commented. "Clear to the bone, most likely. And he couldn't 'a' cooked much this morning. That bacon rind is raw."

They walked about the site, learning how little wood Kragen had cut and comparing

it with their own generous supply. Neil kicked a kettle out of the snow. In the bottom were beans burned to a cinder. A hole had melted through.

"Dozed off while he was cookin'," the trapper said. "And this man with the fly-in' snowshoes has made thirty-one miles in four days."

They went on. It was ten o'clock on their own fourth day. Kragen could not have started much earlier. And he still carried a rifle. Wiley, when he broke trail, kept looking ahead. Thought of the rifle had faded as the chase progressed. Now, with the quarry so near, he saw the huge advantage Kragen possessed.

The way led through a spruce swamp, desolate and oppressive, then out onto a long, narrow lake. Far down the white stretch was a black dot.

"Stop, lad," Neil said. "He might turn and look."

They waited in the timber. For a time Wiley believed the dot did not move. He shivered from cold as he watched, and it was fifteen minutes before Kragen began to draw slowly toward the left and crawl behind a point.

"Now we can go back and build a fire," Neil said. "He's still twenty-five miles from the railroad."

They made a comfortable noon stop, digging snow away to the ground, laying boughs to sit upon, cutting ample fuel. As Wiley warmed himself beside the roaring blaze he thought of the lone figure down the lake, moving so slowly, starving, despairing.

Comfortable, well fed, legs and feet sore but body still strong, Wiley Shaw began to comprehend what had been in Neil's mind from the first. Without weapons, the old man had turned to a sure ally. He had known what sixty miles in more than three feet of snow would be, what the intense cold was like. He had known that a bragging greenhorn, such as Kragen, was unable to take proper care of himself.

After lunch they sat beside the fire in silence until two o'clock, then went on. At

the point down the lake where Kragen had disappeared they turned ashore and made a comfortable camp while it was still light. They sat on their robes in a cozy nest, a huge fire forcing back the cold, and ate satisfyingly.

Not far away, Wiley knew, a man sat in the deep snow, shivering, beside a wholly inadequate blaze—miserable, starving, exhausted.

Wiley glanced at Neil and wondered if the trapper were thinking of this. Neil's face was gray and drawn. He looked much older than his sixty years. His stare was vacant, but after a while it hardened.

"Hell!" Neil muttered to himself. "I've killed a lot o' wolves."

They did not start until late dawn the next morning. The temperature was even lower. Wiley shivered as he clung to the roaring blaze. The first sip of coffee was scalding, the next chilled.

"This is going to be a tough winter," Neil said as he lashed the cover over the toboggan.

Kragen's trail stretched before them to the end of the lake.

"Cold kept him awake, so he started early," was Neil's comment.

Almost at once, after picking up the trail, they found where Kragen had fallen.

"Nothing to trip over here," Neil said significantly.

"You mean he is getting weak?" Wiley asked.

"What if you didn't have much grub or sleep?" the trapper countered.

They left the lake, crossed a short portage, emerged on a muskeg pond. Kragen's trail turned abruptly west. Wiley saw where a man had walked athwart the route in the midst of the last storm.

"Nitchie," Neil said.

"Then Kragen will find him!" Wiley gasped. "Get food and shelter! He'll hire the Indian to take him out to steel. And he's still got the rifle. We haven't a chance now."

Neil Fraser stared at the tracks.

"Why does a dirty crook have to get all the luck?" he demanded hopelessly.

VII

COLD bit deeply as the two stood there. The empty, white world pressed closer. A moose bird fluttered to a nearby limb, but this sole sign of life only stressed the lifelessness of the wilderness.

"That rifle!" Wiley exclaimed bitterly. "He'll keep a look-out, just on the chance we're following."

"Pot us from the camp when the dogs tell him we're coming," Neil added. "But we can't quit, lad—now."

The trapper's pace increased. He no longer alternated with Wiley at the toboggan traces but pressed on relentlessly.

After an hour they found where Kragen's and the Indian's tracks had joined an older trail running at right angles. Kragen had turned to the left, south and toward the railroad. Neil looked at the tracks.

Wiley waited. He was tired. His legs ached. His feet burned from the snowshoe thongs. Almost at once the cold struck through.

The trapper studied the old trail, to the right, and Kragen's fresh trail to the left. On the right were only a series of rounded,



oblong impressions. Neil took off his hat and began to fan one of these. He blew away the last fall of snow. When he ceased his eyes were alight but his features hard.

"Kragen guessed, and guessed wrong," he said grimly. "This Indian was headed west. Kragen's back-trailin' him."

They went on, pressing harder. Soon

they found evidence that Kragen had begun to stagger, at last had fallen.

Night came and they were forced to camp.

"Neil," Wiley said after supper, "Kragen may back track this Indian to a camp. Then we're sunk."

"What I've been thinkin' all afternoon," the trapper growled.

In the morning they passed Kragen's camp. The man had laid some boughs on the snow at the base of a large spruce, had sat there before a small fire through the night. Neil could not find any sign of his having cooked a meal.

Kragen was only two hours ahead of them now and soon, in a hummocky muskeg, they saw where he had missed the faint trail entirely. After wandering about in deep snow searching for it, he had swung south.

"We've got a chance now," Neil muttered.

The muskeg ended at a ridge. The tracks mounted this and dipped to Caribou Lake. For the first time for days, Wiley's eyes were relieved of the strain of universal white. Before him stretched the blue of new ice, formed since the snowstorm.

Kragen had gone out onto the ice but, though Wiley could see some distance, the man was not in sight.

"The other end of this lake is close to steel," Wiley exclaimed. "He has good going now. He'll get away."

Neil did not comment. They tucked their snowshoes under the toboggan lashings and started swiftly down the lake. Neil picked up an occasional footprint on snow that had been blown onto the new ice. Wiley watched the lake ahead, and found nothing.

Caribou Lake narrowed until the shores were a hundred yards apart. Ahead, between low cliffs, a hundred feet spanned the ice. Neil turned to the land.

"Kragen risked the narrows," he said. "Or didn't know there's a current that cuts the ice. We'll play safe."

They put on snowshoes and struggled

for half an hour through the woods. Wiley became frantic at the delay and toiled desperately in the deep snow until they returned to the lake below the narrows.

"There he is!" Wiley exclaimed. "Two miles ahead."

Neil gave Kragen only a glance. "We'll go have a look," he said as he started back to the narrows.

"But Neil!" Wiley protested.

"Kragen'll wait for us."

Wiley could see no reason for plodding through a quarter of a mile of snow or understand why Neil shunned the easy walking on bare ice. But when they reached the cliffs he knew.

A jagged hole in the ice close to shore, dark water showing through, a pack lying at the edge of the snow, one snowshoe afloat—Wiley grasped the story.

"Got to get a fire going quick when you wet your feet in this weather," Neil said with startling savagery. "Man with any sense ought to know that. And after the feet are froze, the frost starts climbin' the legs. See!"

He plowed down to the edge of the ice. Some snow had been blown upon it and Kragen's trail was clear. The footprints were large, jagged, as if his feet were wrapped in burlap.

"After he got out, the snow froze to his shoe-pacs," Neil said. "I counted on this, on these narrows, from the start. But now—out there freezin'—come on!"

HIS voice was still savage. He strode furiously through the snow on the shore of the narrows and out onto the safe ice where they had left the toboggan.

"Young Ware was clean and fine," the trapper said. "Kind you'd like for a friend. But when a wolf's got only two legs——"

Each took a trace. The toboggan slid easily. After days of plodding in deep snow, Wiley felt they were flying over the smooth ice. Quickly they overtook Kragen.

When within half a mile they could see that he traveled with much difficulty. He

fell down frequently, arose with great effort, hobbled on.

Kragen had not looked around. His attention seemed concentrated on progress. Perhaps even now, Wiley thought, his eyes were seeking signs of the railroad, so far away at the other end of the lake.

Neil and Wiley drew closer. When two hundred yards away, they saw that Kragen still carried the rifle. He fell down often now, arose with greater effort. Sometimes he lay still for a minute or more. At last he could no longer rise. He tried, again and again, then started crawling. He shoved the rifle before him on the smooth ice.

"Too weak to walk!" Wiley whispered with a touch of horror in his voice.

"Nothin' to walk on," Neil rasped. "S-s-s-t!"

Kragen, stopping to rest, had turned and seen them. He looked for a long time. When they did not move he started on, crawling, hitching himself along, pushing the rifle. They followed.

"Down!" Neil barked the warning as he threw himself flat.

Kragen fired three shots. Wiley saw two bullets strike the ice. They ricocheted and screamed into the distance.

Then Kragen's curses came, vile and hysterical. He fired a fourth time, blindly, as a frenzied man might hurl a stone at a snapping dog in the dark. He began crawling again.

"Shivers so he can't shoot straight," Neil said.

They went on, slowly. Wiley had seen Neil take many animals from his traps. Always they snarled and fought to the end. This was the same. Wiley felt it was not a man they were following but a tameless beast that did not admit a possibility of aid, that slashed back with deadly fangs.

Kragen crawled on. Before him lay a string of islands. He passed through these just as the sun set and crawled slowly out onto the big traverse of Caribou Lake, a vast field of ice. To Wiley Shaw, firm,

on his own two legs, well fed, unspent, the black expanse was appalling.

"We can't do this!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

"What else can we do?" Neil countered. "He's still got that rifle. Two legs or four, I guess a wolf's the same."

He spoke gruffly, but his voice cracked a bit.

"Watch he don't turn back," Neil said when they reached the islands. "I'll make camp."

He dragged the toboggan ashore and into thick spruce and jackpine. Wiley stood there, watching Kragen move so slowly onto the big traverse. The man often lay resting, then hitched himself on. Sound of the ax brought a suggestion of warmth and comfort.

Kragen crawled on. Wiley, shivering in the intense cold, saw him grow dim in the gathering darkness. He waited until his eyes stung, until at last he could find only blackness over the lake.

Camp, as always, was snug. Supper was hot and plentiful, the tea scalding. The cold was bitter. Trees cracked. Ice rumbled and roared.

NEIL FRASER stared into the leaping flames. His face was grim, gray, hard. Wiley wondered how he could ever have thought him gentle and kindly. The younger man could not keep his thoughts from that great expanse of black lake, from a human being starved, frozen, crawling; hitching himself along, so slowly, and still

more slowly; weighted down by the cold, by terror, by the chill breath of death itself.

"What if we hadn't come?" Neil broke the silence harshly. "He'd be right where he is now. Not a thing different."

Wiley understood then. All this time Neil had been savage only with himself. He had been fighting the same battle Wiley was fighting.

"Ware showin' us pictures of his wife and kid," the trapper continued. "Cute kid. Same hair as his dad. Same grin. And Kragen listenin' to it, listenin' to how a brother or a sister is comin' along next month. And with the tracks o' that fresh in his dirty ears, he goes and——"

Neil was silent a moment. He became a bit dim in Wiley's eyes.

"Anyhow, he's still got the rifle. And his legs are froze past the knees by now. Two legs or four, a wolf——"

He arose abruptly and prepared for bed. But when they had rolled in their robes, Wiley Shaw could not sleep. He lay endlessly thinking always of the great black lake, and of a man crawling, so slowly.

"You can't beat the bush," Neil spoke unexpectedly from the depths of his rabbit-skin. "Got to be good just to tie it."

Long afterward, when Wiley was sure the trapper was no longer awake, Neil spoke again.

"We'll get the money for young Ware's wife. It's just plain black hell, lad, that we can't send Ware to her, too. If I keep thinkin' that, may be I can get to sleep."





Adventurers All



UNDERGROUND CHANCES

SINCE the time I was entombed in a gold mine in the Mother Lode Country in California, I have become a devout fatalist. When you hear my story, I'm sure you'll agree with me that it's in the cards for some to get it, while others escape death by a narrow margin.

When I graduated as a mining engineer from the New Mexico School of Mines I thought that the world would make overtures for my services. During my vacations I worked underground, and equipped with this practical experience, together with my college training, I visualized a soft white collar job with a large mining company. To my dismay I found that all work was scarce, and consequently I was very happy, after much persistence, to obtain underground work at mucker's wages.

After spending several years working in mines in New Mexico and Arizona, I secured a technical position with a large oil company in California. This, of course, paid me a good salary, but mining seems to be a profession which gets into one's blood, and when the price of gold increased, which made gold mining profitable, I felt the urge to return to my first love.

The increase in the price of the yellow metal reopened mines which had been idle for a quarter of a century. Some of these were flooded with water, others had caved in at places, and still others needed new timbering. But these obstacles did not deter or discourage mining men and promoters from opening up and working these old mines, and the mining country hummed with activity.

I found myself working for a promoter who was interested in the old Harmon Mine, near Placerville, and if my survey proved encouraging, he planned on working the mine. At the start, I quickly saw that we were faced with many obstacles. The mine was almost inaccessible, being located in a precipitous canyon, and the road that led to it would be more fitting for a mountain goat than for one of Mr. Ford's early creations.

But it seems that if it isn't one thing in the mining game it's another, for the very earth itself seems to resent yielding her treasures to man, and the approach to the mine was only one of our problems. Many of the drifts and laterals had caved in, and much of the timbering was rotten and defective.

A chap by the name of Emmons, and a young lad named Stoney were my helpers, and much of our time was spent cutting timber near the property as our employer did not have the funds to purchase the seasoned pine generally used for such purposes. On the day of the accident we were retimbering and cleaning out the debris from a lateral drift, the face of which had caved in.

To prove the perversities of fate, I went home for lunch as I was stricken with a sudden attack of pleurisy. My wife gave me an alcohol rub and insisted that I go to bed; but after this treatment, I felt so relieved that I decided to return to the mine. I'm glad now that I returned to work, for as events turned out, I would not want people to think that I was aware of the danger and ran out on my partners.

STONE and I were about thirty feet apart, I being at the face of the wall. Emmons was on his way out to fetch some tools we needed. The first warning of danger came to me when I heard a crackling noise like wood breaking. Then with a roar, the whole earth seemed to collapse.

Some instinct made me crouch low and my acetylene torch was knocked from my hand, leaving me in total darkness. For a moment I did not know whether I was dead or alive. When I was able to adjust myself to the shock, I found that I could move my arm slightly. The rest of my body rested in a prone position in a recess made by some of the timbering.

I shouted wildly for Stoney. My voice seemed to express my helplessness. I heard no response—I knew I was buried alive. I was in total darkness, and although there was life in my body, I had little hope.

I knew other men had been buried alive in mines—this was a frequent occurrence in the history of the mining country. And many had escaped! But this was of no great encouragement to me; for situated as I was, almost on top of me huge rocks which might be dislodged by a subsequent cave-in, I knew that it would be a difficult task to get me without disturbing these tons of rock.

Imprisoned in this manner for I do not know how long, all of my thoughts turned to my wife and baby. Then came the most welcome grating I ever hope to hear in my life. It was the noise of miners' tools scraping rock. It seemed days before I could hear shouts. I answered in response, and was told not to lose hope. Crews had been recruited from adjacent mines, and they were working unceasingly to release me.

In the meantime I was cheered by the sound of my wife's voice, and shortly afterward hot nourishment was shoved to me through a small opening in the rocks. I knew I was not yet released from my prison, but the hot coffee, the sound of cheering voices, and the small ray of light that entered my sepulchre, seemed as sweet and cheering as life itself after my ordeal.

Stoney must have been killed instantaneously. When working with us, he must have had a premonition of his fate, for he frequently showed his fears, not by words, but by his expression when we would enter the mine. However, he had been game! We all know he would have been saved if he had run three feet in the opposite direction from which he did. But as I said before, his time must have been up, showing that we can't somehow seem to escape our fate.

Emmons, like me, had a narrow escape. When the drift caved in, the rock, flowing like so much water, started the ore car down the tracks at a dizzy pace. Fortunately it only hit Emmons a glancing blow, otherwise he could not have escaped and notified the rescuing party.

The ironical part of the whole experience is that I was unable to collect my pay from the man who hired me. But that's the mining game. One never knows whether he is going to strike it rich, or have a vein which looked promising suddenly pinch out. And I suppose, much the same reasons have kept me shoe stringing along in the gold country of California. And after all, it occurs to me that life is pretty much that way too! One will follow a likely looking vein with great expectations for weeks, and then see it suddenly pinch out.

—O. W. Terry

\$15 For True Adventures

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BLACK CAT

By J. ALLAN DUNN

Author of

"Sailorman," "Jungle Gold," etc.



Where All Black Cats Are

Welcome—Mascot

or Jinx

FLASHLIGHT put her head over the half-door of her stall and nuzzled at me. The filly was fit. Her hide was like satin, the color of a polished chestnut. Her lustrous eyes, as she nibbled at my sleeve, seemed to say, "I'm winning today."

The black cat that had adopted us, and which had palled up with Flashlight, drifted out of nowhere, mysteriously, as it always did; spookily seeming to materialize in the shadows. It arched its back, purring, with tail erect, weaving airy pretzels about my legs.

Zeke claimed it was a mascot. I hoped so. I needed one. But I was not so sure about black cats. It depends upon how you approach them, or they approach you; if they cross your path, or run away from you. And it's all mixed up. No two countries agree upon it. I had an uncle who stepped on a black cat in the dark, when he was sneaking out from a forbidden rendezvous with his sweetie. The cat turned

into a clawing centipede. Uncle was forbidden the house, and he lost the girl. He thought he was very unlucky for a while, and then he changed his mind. So—there you are.

Our cat arrived sight-unseen. She was in the stall one morning, quite at home. Mascot or jinx, she had moved in.

"I'm tellin' you, Mistuh Selwyn, that filly *can't* lose," Zeke asserted. "'Cause why? The hawss's ready to run. The distance and the track am right. You the owner, you *want* her to win. Me, I'm *ridin'* her to win. That cat she *know* she gwine win. Nevuh switch her tail like that, unless. We know she gwine behave at the barrier today."

"I hope so," I told him. Flashlight had been a poor starter, nervous, excited, inclined to be vicious. That was one reason why she had been overlooked in the betting this afternoon. The odds-board gave us twenty-five to one. But we had found out the trouble.

Once we removed the wolf teeth, vestigial remnants of primordial steeds, from each side of her grinders; she behaved like a lamb. Instead of a teething, petulant babe.

The filly had not been in a race since. And Zeke was right. The distance, six-furlongs in the Sandown Handicap for two-year-olds, was right. The condition of the track was right. But I was worried. I *had* to win this race. I owed over three hundred dollars for feed to "Judge" Lyman, and he had been nasty about it.

FLASHLIGHT was the last of my string, frayed by the fingers of Fate. By breeding, she should be the best of them. She was sound as a mountain trout, without fault or flaw; and she had the speed.

"Look what she clocked this mawnin'," said Zeke. "One-ten! What it take Man o' War to win when he was two-yeah old? One-eleven-three-fif' Futurity Stakes, Belmont Park. Yessuh."

"When he did that in nineteen-nineteen," I said, "he was packing a hundred and twenty-seven pounds. You rode Flashlight this morning at about a hundred and twelve. She carries one-twenty-five in the race."

"Anyone 'ud think you-all didn' *want* this hawss to win. Look at Ekkypoise. In nineteen-thirty he toted hunderd an' twenty-six pounds in the Eastern Shore Handicap. What he do then, huh; when *he* was two-yeah old? Bes' he could do, to win, was one-twelve-an'-two-fiffs. We's gwine make record today, Mistuh Selwyn."

"Stuffy" Dolan came nosing into the stable. Dolan was once a jockey, and a good one. But he was tricky, and got ruled off. He put on fat. Now he was a tipster, a tout who could pick a winner pretty often, but usually named three or four nags in one race to the suckers. A pretty shady customer, Dolan, but he had a name of playing fair with his pals.

"I hear the filly looks good," he said.

"Who told you—and what?"

"My stop-watch told me, if it was tickin' right this morning. I might have stopped her down wrong, seein' I was a bit jittery.

I don't often go pickin' mornin'-glories that early."

Zeke and I had had the filly out before sun-up. We had made the trial in the morning twilight. There had been one or two fence-riders, but they had been on the far side from the finish. We had taken care of that. But if Dolan had been one of them, the word might have passed. The odds were holding up. Yet I didn't like it. I had a hunch things were going too smoothly. Luck was due to shake me by the hand, but it might be waiting to give me another kick in the breeches.

"You clocking *me*, Dolan?"

"Aw, not to give you away, Mr. Selwyn. Not for outsiders. But I'm toutin' Flashlight to win. What I tout don't affect the odds none. I'm lucky today. I pick four guys an' a couple dames, who'll bet on the filly. I stand to get a nice cut. Gord knows I need it."

He was genuinely injured. "I got my *own* dough up," he said. "My eatin' money. On the nose."

That was the way I had bet all I could rake and scrape, borrow and pawn. Eight hundred and forty dollars in all. Not much, to spread across the board; enough to set me on my feet properly, at twenty-five to one, after paying off. And, if the filly proved that good——?

A BUGLE sounded. Zeke, jockey and swipec in one, blanketed and hooded the filly. Dolan went into the stall to help him. I didn't figure him as up to any chicanery. I had helped him out once; when he was in bad shape, and his wife ill. He might be a bit of a crook, but he was straight with me. I didn't notice whether he came out, or what happened to him, as I watched Zeke leading Flashlight to the paddock.

She stepped like a young doe, on long, springy pasterns. Her ears were pricked, her head up, her eyes luminous as living jewels, like great magical opals, brown melting into blue.

She was bred for this. She went daintily,

but she was keen for it all. Racing was in her blood and spirit. The packed stands, the bugles, the quivering, contagious excitement of man and beast, the glory of her own speed.

I turned back into the stable. Perhaps my luck had turned, maybe the black cat—

There it was, gliding by me. It made a sudden scoot across the path of a man just coming in. And I hoped her crossing meant bad luck for him.

My hunch of trouble had materialized. I knew the man, a deputy-sheriff, one of the lean, crafty crackers who get their badges through murky politics, who act as tax collectors, serve summonses, carry out evictions, enjoying the authority and the dirty work.

He gave me a false, brown-toothed grin. I knew his errand, not the first of its kind at the track. Nemesis arriving at the crucial moment. It was that damned feed-bill.

"I got some paphehs to serve on you-all, Mr. Selwyn," he said with mock deprecation. He was gloating inwardly, especially



since I was not of his state, but from Kentucky. "Reckon I'll have to attach yo' filly, to satisfy Jedge Lyman's claim."

Lyman's title of "judge" attained from his appreciation of liquor. But he was also a good judge of horseflesh. He wanted my filly. She rated more than his bill, whatever her past performances.

"You can't do that—until after the race," I said. "If she wins, I can clear the attachment a hundred times over."

"If she wins." He grinned his sly grin. "Looks like the experts don't think she's

so hot, by the odds. The jedge, he 'lows he most owns her, anyway, 'count of the feed he's put into her. Of course, if you kin pay——"

A bugle blew again. The saddling-call. Flashlight was due at the start in a few minutes.

I went hot and cold. It was like taps blown over the grave of my last chance. This was my last show.

"Why not wait until after the race?" I asked, sick at having to plead with him; with his half-baked, biscuity face, his pale blue eyes and foxy smile.

"She wouldn't know she was ever in it."

I knew he was lying. The pupils of his eyes were quivering. Lyman had been tipped-off. I thought of Dolan, looked for him. Flashlight was entered in my name. If she was attached she could not run in his. Not now. But he would clean-up with her. He had nothing to lose.

The deputy's face was greasy with a malicious triumph as I stood in the door, facing him. His back was to the stall. He started to fumble in his breast pocket for his papers.

And then his eyes were set and goofy. A silly smile melted his indeterminate features, as if they were a waxen mask in the sun. His knees buckled, and he went down to them, down to the floor.

It was no act of mine. No intention. But it was too providential to be overlooked. He had passed out with some sort of stroke. He had not served his papers. The filly was free to run.

I took a good look at him, at his eyes, felt his pulse. It was sturdy enough. I hauled him into the stall, laid him on the clean straw. Something seemed to stir in a dark corner. Likely enough the cat. I went out, locking the door after me. He would not come around for a while, but he was all right. I have seen plenty of men in his case.

The bugle shrilled again. They were saddled, being called-out for the race. In two or three minutes it would all be over,

but the shouting. And if he was up and shouting, nobody would notice it.

The black cat bolted out between my legs, went prancing off like a sprite, yellow eyes gleaming.

SIX furlongs is three-quarters of a mile. It takes from seventy to seventy-five seconds for a top-horse to cover. The average pulse beats seventy to the minute. It accelerates, marks time to the tattoo of hoofs, the springing leaps.

They were off! Flashlight was well away. There had been no need to give Zeke any last instructions. He knew the filly, and she knew him; I could see him through my binoculars, clinging like a monkey on her withers. She had been given Number Five in the barrier stalls. Now she was running third, easy and true.

Blackcock had the rail, making pace for his stable-mate, Gamester, the odds-on favorite. It was a race.

They were carrying her wide at the turn—Blackcock and Gamester. But Blackcock was tiring, and Flashlight coming strong. The field tailed them, though the bay gelding, Jabberwock, was hitting his stride, moving up. Fast, on the inside. He passed the failing Blackcock. His nose was up to Gamester's girth.

Zeke made his bid. There was an opening between them and he tried for it. Gamester had the rail. Gamester would win, if Zeke had to keep wide on the last of the curve.

They were in the straight, the beginning of the stretch. Flashlight's muzzle was between the flanks of the others. She was gaining at every jump.

I let out a groan. They had her pocketed. They would not let her through. Two white boys, one Irish, and one Italian; combined against the negro.

No chance now. They were too closely woven. If Flashlight had been behind, and clear, I thought she could have made it, even if Jabberwock's rider bored out. Those two were clever lads. They did not mean

to be disqualified for fouling. Flashlight had nosed-in. They did not have to give way.

There was a sorrowful gladness in seeing how she ran, how she challenged, going free, but shut-off from the sprint I could feel burning within her.

Twenty yards to go—and the crowd shouting, at the driving finish!

Some wag called it the Ripley finish—"Believe it or not!" On sheer performance, on reserve, Flashlight had the race won. Gamester was dropping back, but not enough, not at that stage of the game. It was a question of seconds.

And then—and then—something streaked across the track, hellbent. A black bur of speed. A cat. *Our cat.*

There may have been a dog around under the grandstand. It might have been sheer caprice. It might have been a reincarnation of Bubastis, the cat-goddess of Egypt, impersonating Fate.

Jabberwock swerved—Flashlight went by Gamester, headed Jabberwock, crossed the wire, winner by a head. Time—one-eleven and a fifth.

I don't know where Bubastis—if it were Bubastis—went. I never saw that cat again. But all black cats are welcome to my stable.

IT WAS not a popular victory. It was not an outstanding race—even though a track record was broken. There was no floral horseshoe. Zeke, his black face slashed with pearl, took the filly away, to cool her off. I went to the pari-mutuel window to realize. I saw Dolan hanging round, waiting to see if those, to whom he had tipped the filly, were cashing in.

He gave me a joyous wink, and I knew he had got at least part of his cut.

It was only then, with my pockets lined with bills, that I remembered the deputy. I could satisfy Lyman's claim within the limit. I was walking on air when I got back to the stable and opened the door. The deputy was still in the straw, but he

was coming to. I helped him to his feet.

"You slugged me, dern ye, you slugged me from behind! But you got to take the papers."

"Hand them over," I said. "So I slugged you from behind, when I was standing in front of you. There are just two in my outfit, as she stands. Zeke and



myself. Zeke was in the paddock. Did you have a fit, or were you drinking?"

He thrust the papers at me, and I accepted them.

"The filly won," I said. "The race is over. I got twenty-five to one." I showed him my winnings.

"Lyman'll give me hell fer this. Reckon I'll lose my job. I tell you, somethin' hit me."

He felt his head gingerly, back of one ear.

"I got a lump, big as a pigeon's egg," he said. "Must have been someone back in the stall."

"I didn't plant him there," I said honestly. "You tell Judge Lyman you couldn't find me. And put a plaster on that lump."

I peeled off a century note and gave it to him. His shallow eyes bulged. He slipped away, as if he were afraid I'd take it away from him.

Dolan arrived, with Zeke, and the filly.

"How did you make out?" I asked.

"Three outa the bunch played," he said. "Only one on the nose. The rest smeared it. But I did pretty good."

He started to help Zeke unblanket. The filly was puffing for a drink, looking for her mash.

I stripped another century off that nice

roll of mine, slipped it to Dolan. Zeke would get his later.

"What's this for?" asked Dolan.

"You can call it an advance, if you want to come to work for me. I'm buying horses. I can use you, Stuffy."

He was a hard lad; but he was soft, in spots. He began to cry, quietly but earnestly.

"Gee, Mr. Selwyn, you mean it? I don't see now why I rate this century note."

"What made you slug the deputy? It was either you, or the cat."

"Why wouldn't I slug that louse? The filly was right, an' him an' Lyman knew it. They had it rigged agin' you. I was back in the stall, see; and I had a sap with me, see; so when he tries to pull his play, I let him have it, back of the ear."

He took a blackjack from his pocket, a weapon of soft leather with a bulbous head filled with buckshot.

"I know you won't stand for this sort of stuff," he said. "Take it, Mr. Selwyn."

"Throw it in the river, Dolan."

Zeke came out grinning from the stall.

"Ah won me nine bucks last night at craps," he said, "an' put it on the nose. Baby, I got me a ticket at twenty-five to one."

"Go and cash it," I told him. "Lose it tonight, if you want to. You've got plenty more coming."

"No suh. I ain' shootin' no mo' craps. I'se gwine entertain mah honey."

"How about you, Dolan?"

He was still sniffing. "I'm going to show this to the wife and tell her I've got a job—with you."

When they were gone I counted over the roll, figured up my debts, and what I might have to pay for the start of my new string.

I could see the blue grass waving in Kentucky.

Dolan had his wife, Zeke his money.

And there was someone in Old Kentucky—for me.

*The Men Who Fought for Texas
A Hundred Years Ago*

DEAD MEN SINGING

by
H. BEDFORD-JONES



VI—THE MAN ALONE



I REACHED the old battlefield of San Jacinto about noon. The Texas sun was hot, a hot breeze swept up from the Gulf; just as on that day a hundred years ago when Sam Houston gave the word to charge. The scene fascinated me, not so much for what had happened here, but for what lay behind it. One man, who had prepared against what never came, and who suddenly seized the fleeting moment and grasped immortality. As I stared across the scene, a lilt of song came to me; it waved in the whispering of the grass and trees, it drifted down the hot sunlight. A man's rough, hoarse voice singing, as though to himself, in throaty exultation:

"We had to win or go under. We fought for a living Cause,

Not for a passel of statesmen working their slobbering jaws;
We planted with powder and bullet, we made a republic grow—
For by God, sir! We founded Texas a hundred years ago!"

I blinked around. Nothing in sight. No one was here. Yet a sudden thin burst of sound lifted, like the thin and distant voices of men in unison roaring forth a wild and hearty yell:

"Here's to you, Gin'ral Hquston, damn your eyes!"

Sheer fancy, of course. And yet this ground had been stained deep with the blood of men; yonder river had run scarlet with death, a hundred years ago—

GONZALES, which had witnessed the first shot fired for Texas liberty, was now witnessing a very different scene.

Sam Houston and his hastily gathered force, marching to the relief of the Alamo, had halted here. And here the news had reached them.

Consternation, grief, filled the town and camp. Scouts were hurriedly sent forth toward Bexar; a pall of mourning lay over the place. Scarcely a person had not lost

friends or relatives in the Alamo. Houston sat with Colonel Sherman, the brave Kentuckian who had come to fight for Texas, and despondency mastered him.

A gaunt man, Houston, massive, powerful, blunt. His deep-set, patient eyes were pools of gray light, deepened by suffering both physical and mental. His gigantic frame wore no uniform, but shabby, baggy, dirty garments. They, like himself, were worn to shreds by what he had endured and spent in the cause of Texas.

"Travis and the rest—all dead!" he growled. "It may not be true. Those two Mexicans who brought the news may have been wrong. We'll hear from Deaf Smith or Karnes or other scouts pretty quick now."

"What'll you do then, Sam?" queried Sherman. He had borne from Kentucky the flag under which the army of Texas marched—a figure of Liberty on a white ground, heavy gold fringe surrounding it.

"God knows!" said Houston. "We've got four hundred men here. I've ordered Fannin to abandon Goliad and fall back to the Guadalupe. That'll give us four hundred more and some cannon, if he can

bring his artillery away. We've got to stop any panic breaking out, or we're done for."

"No panic," said Sherman coolly. "The die is cast now. The Convention has declared for Liberty. We're fighting for freedom, not to keep Texas in the Mexican union. And you're the commander in chief, Sam. They had to come to you at last!"

NO EXULTATION touched the grim bronzed mask of Houston. At last, yes!

All these weary months he had ridden up and down the settlements, preaching liberty, orating, raising men and money.



He had been appointed general before, and the politicians gathered at San Felipe had deposed him. They had been fighting among themselves for months in bitter rancor. Mainly, they had been fighting him. They feared his blunt tongue, his vision, his honesty. He was the most powerful man in all Texas, and well they knew it, so the story spread that he wanted to become dictator. He, who had not a dollar nor a home to his name!

Bitterness deepened in his eyes. Two days more, and he would have been in Bexar—but now the Alamo had fallen.

He had four hundred men in his army. How many had come out of Mexico with Santa Anna, no one knew as yet. His army was a pack of volunteers, without discipline. He could give no orders, but only requests. He could punish none. They laughed at any idea of training or order. But they were not laughing tonight, nor was he.

"Sherman, tell me the truth." He lifted the deep gray eyes in a tragic look. "How far can I count on the boys? What do they say about me? I know all that's said of me in San Felipe and so on—but what about the army?"

"They're for you, Sam," said the Kentuckian simply. "They want to fight, and you're the man to lead 'em. All they ask is to meet the Mexicans face to face."

"Yes." The tragic look deepened. Houston's heart sank. "Meet cannon, lancers, trained regiments face to face—with what? Do you know how much artillery, powder and supplies the army has?"

"No," said Sherman in surprise. "Artillery's coming from New Orleans, of course, and I understand there's no lack of transport."

"No lack," said Houston, with a grim smile. "Right now we haven't a cannon. The transport consists of two yoke of oxen, two wagons, and a dozen horses. The equipment of the men is about as good, except for your company of Kentuckians. Chew on that for a spell, and gimme a drink."

Sherman passed over the jug, and Houston lifted it. Suddenly he set it down and leaped to his feet. Shouts were rising through the town and camp. A galloping horse came to a halt outside. Into the headquarters tent burst the scout Karnes, waving a paper. Colonel Austin and other officers followed him in.

"We met up with Mrs. Dickinson twenty mile out," panted Karnes. "Her and a couple negroes—all that's alive out'n the Alamo. Cap'n Dickinson and the kid were killed. Deef Smith stayed to fetch her along in. I come with the news, and this. She got it from General Sesma as she was leaving Bexar——"

HOUSTON seized the paper—a boasting proclamation signed by Santa Anna and ordering death and no quarter to all rebels.

"Well, Karnes? What news?"

"It's all true," groaned the scout. "Every last one dead. Nobody surrendered. And Santy Anny's got thousands and thousands of men, she says. He didn't even bury the bodies, but burned 'em. And he's got another army as big under Gin'ral Urrea who's grabbed Fannin and Goliad by this time. He's a-sweeping all Texas, and she heard some talk that he's a-going right on into the States as well."

So the news of the Alamo was poured forth, while Houston stood with shaggy brows knit and resolve hardening within him. A few hundred men should have gathered at San Felipe by this time, with provisions, powder and stores. He beckoned his aid, Colonel Austin, aside.

"Ride like hell for San Felipe, Bill. I got to stick right here and—what's that, Karnes? What was that last?"

"She says Santy Anny's coming right on, may be here any time," said Karnes. "He aims to burn every house and kill every settler that ain't Mexican by birth. And he's on the way."

"Well, shut your damned mouth about it," snapped Houston, but it was too late now. With an oath, he turned back

to Austin. "You see? Now I got to bring off all these here settlers and fight off the Mexicans, if they're coming. Get to San Felipe. Raise every man you can, get powder and transport and cannon somehow! Drill those men if you get a chance. For God's sake check any panic, Bill!"

Austin nodded and departed.

Later, Mrs. Dickinson and the two negroes were brought in. Deaf Smith, the famous scout, came straight to Houston with one of the negroes, who had been the slave of Travis. Houston learned the details, then asked after Mrs. Dickinson.

"Some o' them women are takin' care of her," said Smith. "She's goin' to have a baby pretty soon and she's downright hysterical. She'll raise hell, lemme tell you, Sam."

And she did, poor soul. True, General Sesma was coming with a mere seven hundred dragoons; but Mrs. Dickinson's nerve-shattered fears magnified this into thousands. Neither Houston nor anyone else had definite information on the numbers of Santa Anna's army. It was certainly composed of two or three columns aiming to sweep all Texas, and it was most assuredly some thousands strong, with artillery, lancers and dragoons.

PANIC seized upon Gonzales and upon the army here. The one thought was of flight, and Houston could barely impose some semblance of order on that flight. His own men were deserting hourly, rushing away to get their families and friends out of the tornado's path. These deserters, galloping from town to town, spread wild stories, which grew more wild as they were handed on. Throughout eastern Texas the panic became universal. Every man's intent was now to get his own family to safety, regardless. Every community had but the one thought—to protect its own women and children. Consequently, all thought of joining the army was abandoned. Let others do that! And none did.

Gonzales was abandoned and burned. Slowly, Houston retreated, gathering in all

the settlers as he went, protecting the flood of refugees that poured across the wide plains. He sent out frantically for reinforcements and aid. The men from San Felipe joined him and raised his force to six hundred in all. Two cannon were promised, but came not.

So at last he came to the Colorado River of Texas, crossed it, and halted. Various skirmishes had temporarily checked the Mexicans, who were now awaiting their main columns. They were across the river, almost within sight. And here began Sam Houston's weeks of agony, as he devoted himself to drilling his men and keeping them in hand, hoping against hope that Fannin might yet join him.

The few hundred men under his command were the whole hope of Texas. What these men wanted was to fight—and do it now.

Harsh, uncompromising, blunt as ever, he refused flatly to jeopardize Texas until he got artillery, powder, men and food. Rations were scant. Daily Houston looked for word of relief, but his emissaries returned empty-handed. And Santa Anna was advancing, with artillery.

Houston's men jeered at him to his face, hotly telling him that rifles alone would send the Mexicans flying. They begged with him, pleaded with him, swore at him; he remained adamant. President Burnet and the new government, at San Felipe, were moving heaven and earth to raise men and money and guns. Food was coming; let the army wait until it came, with the cannon.

No use. They wore him down, actual mutiny threatened, his authority evaporated. Six hundred men could whip all Mexico! Sherman told him frankly that the men could no longer be controlled, and for his own sake he must yield. So, bitter-hearted, he yielded. It was arranged that on the following morning, the army should cross the river and attack the Mexican camp hand to hand. Details were set forth—and then, suddenly, a scout came in with news.

Johnson's force had been destroyed. Ward had capitulated. Fannin's entire force was captured and massacred—the first definite news of this. And columns of the enemy were pouring forward in overwhelming numbers.

The army was stunned, paralyzed. All thought of attack was given over. Vainly did Houston pronounce the news false—men knew better. The delusion that Texans could not be defeated was gone. Suddenly all the army realized its own weakness.

Next day came further news, and the darkness began indeed to clamp down on Sam Houston. The cabinet, the whole Texan government, was in flight. San Felipe was being abandoned; New Washington, named as the capital, was being abandoned. East to Harrisburg for the government of republican Texas! Harrisburg and safety!

Sam Houston swore heartily and sat him down to write his steadfast friend Rusk, the secretary of war:

"You know I am not easily depressed, but before God I swear that since we parted I have found the darkest hours of my life. For two days and nights I have not eaten an ounce of anything, or slept for a moment . . ."

RETREAT now, retreat once more. Another flood of frightened settlers to be moved back eastward. Back to San Felipe on the Brazos River—a nightmare march with pitiless cold and rain, with the Mexican dragoons pressing close behind, and a flooded river ahead to cross. It was crossed at last and the bridge destroyed. Another respite now, a chance to hope and breathe.

Vituperation poured upon Houston from every side. What! Run away from these Mexicans? Let them burn and slay on every side without hindrance? Sam Houston was only a lawyer after all. He knew nothing about fighting. He was ruining Texas.

The army murmured. Houston was drilling them day and night, preparing them to meet artillery, cavalry, trained infantry; teaching them to obey orders. Who was he to give them orders anyhow? By God, they were just as good as Sam Houston any day! And they'd prove it. They'd elect another general. Why, he didn't even consult with them or with the officers about what to do! True enough.

"I hold no councils of war," Houston wrote the government. "If I err, the blame is mine."

He drilled them himself, and they hated him for it; but they dared not defy him to his face. The power was there, in those deep gray eyes; the spirit was there, the courage of endurance, the domination that comes from suffering and patience. The one man on whom he could rely utterly was Deaf Smith, the scout, who came and went. Santa Anna was at San Felipe now. If he crossed the Brazos, all was lost. Captain Baker with a handful of men was holding the ford there against him.

One night, without warning, Deaf Smith showed up.

"Fighting," he reported curtly. "Baker's held the ford two days and repulsed Santy Anny, Gin-ral."

"Thank God," breathed Houston. "Sure of it, Deef?"

"Yeah, but that ain't all, Sam. He's got acrost at Thompson's Ferry and is heading for Harrisburg with the hull damned army after him."

"What!" Houston leaped up. "For Harrisburg? But——"

"Ain't no buts, Sam. The president and the cabinet's done skipped out for Galveston. I met up with Rusk, the sec'etery of war, down the road; he's headin' to join up with you. Got a few fellers with him."

Houston sank down on his camp stool, and swallowed hard. "I suppose you don't know anything about how many men Santa Anna has? Or if he's heading down the Brazos—why, he'd have to do that, to reach Harrisburg!"

"He sure is. Got about a thousand men

with him. The rest of his army is in two other columns. Sam, one north, one south—hey! What's up?"

For, with one bound, Houston was out of his seat, a flame in his gray eyes.

"Are you sure? Sure? Careful now, Deef! Sure of those numbers?"

"Yeah. We done caught a feller from his column."

"Thank God; oh, thank God!" cried Houston, and grabbed his hat. "Go get some sleep, Deef. We're marching in the morning. See you later."

NO SLEEP for Sam Houston this night. When Rusk showed up, Houston grappled him in a bearlike embrace. A courier came dashing in, as the army was turning out hastily, with a letter from the acting secretary, who had taken the place of Rusk. A letter of bitter vituperation, demanding action from Houston; a frightened, panicky letter. And the government had fled to Galveston! Houston grinned and tucked the script away.

"We're marching in the morning, boys. Get ready," boomed out Houston's voice as the torches flung red radiance on his bronzed features, no longer weary. "Five hundred and twenty-five men, huh? That's enough, I reckon. You'll get your bellies full o' fight this trip, boys! Dismissed."

Yells of glee, sudden vociferous shouts for Sam Houston. New shouts rang forth, new yells pealed up. Into camp past the sentries slogged a wagon, then another. Two six-pounders, sent by friends of Texas from Cincinnati—here in the nick of time! The packing cases still unopened.

Houston detailed artillery men to get the guns assembled, saw to every detail of preparation himself, came back to headquarters dead tired. There he found Deaf Smith.

"I got me enough sleep, Sam," said the scout. "Let's get busy. Need me?"

"We sure do, Deef. Take all the scouts you can find, and trail Santa Anna's column. If he's heading for Harrisburg, he's bound to cross the river at the Lynchburg

ferry. I'll get there first—and if I do, we've got him where we want him! Have word for me sure. We'll set out at daylight, and by next morning ought to be there."

"Got you. Good luck, Sam," and Deaf Smith was gone.

Dead tired as he was, Sam Houston sat gazing into the flame of his candle for a long while before turning in. Suddenly, unexpectedly, he saw the one thing he had prayed heaven to grant him coming true—a chance to smash at the head and center of the whole Mexican army. A thousand men; no more than two to his one. And two cannon had come. It was his hour, his hour, and the hour of Texas!

No haphazard. No mere chance. He saw the thing clearly. From this moment he planned the event. Nothing should spoil his stroke now; whatever happened, he must go through with it as he saw it.

That resolve was to be tested sorely.

Santa Anna would reach Harrisburg, yes; but coming back, he must cross by Lynch's Ferry. Santa Anna, with a thousand men, away from the main body of his army which was sweeping over the whole country! Sam Houston went to bed with ringing thoughts.

Daybreak found him up and off—the last march.

SANTA ANNA not only reached Harrisburg, but burned it. He tried to catch the Texas government, and was within five minutes of bagging the whole crowd from the president down. He took New Washington unhindered, then turned from Galveston Bay and headed through the oaks and brush for Lynch's Ferry. He had no suspicion that Sam Houston was ahead of him.

Ahead of him, yes; and Deaf Smith was on the job. After that long and weary march, the Texas army was worn out. The Mexican vanguard came up. Houston steadily declined battle, ordered his men to eat and sleep. The Cincinnati cannon, the

"Twin Sisters," were in battery. The camp was fortified.

Santa Anna described the little camp, with its gaily waving flag bearing the figure of Liberty, and laughed. Grimly calm as any Indian, Sam Houston watched the Mexican forces encamp. He had chosen the position to suit himself, and he meant to choose the time to suit himself also—that was part of his plan. He did not intend to throw his men into battle directly after a march.

When the Mexican cannon opened, however, and the skirmishers, that afternoon, crept forward under cover, he had them cleared out in short order. The "Twin Sisters" opened fire, his horsemen charged, and the skirmish was over. Late that night, Deaf Smith came into Houston's tent and wakened him.

"Hey, Sam! I didn't want to blurt it out afore anybody, but there's a hell of a lot o' Mexicans on the way. They ain't far, neither. Gin'ral Cos and his dragoons."

Houston caught his breath, then assented calmly.

"Thanks, Deef. You stick around; be here at daylight sure. I got work for you."

No more sleep that night. General Cos and more dragoons! How many? Hard to say. Yet the plan must hold at all costs. Regardless of odds. So Santa Anna did not attack because he was waiting for Cos, eh? Sly fellow, that El Presidente!

Daylight. Houston took Deaf Smith into his tent and showed him a number of axes.

"Deef, pick your own men and get to work. Suppose anything happened so's those Mexicans wanted to get away from here in a hurry. How'd they get over the San Jacinto?"

"They might swim," said Deaf Smith, with a grin. "Or they might cross by Vince's bridge, down the stream a ways. That's how they got here."

"You go cut away Vince's bridge, then," said Houston. "And get back here in a hurry if you want to see the fun."

No mean job, this; several miles of

woods to cross, and a bridge to cut, while the Mexicans were all about. Deaf Smith set forth with his party, but on learning their objective they balked flatly. Moses Lapham alone went on with him, and Vince's bridge was destroyed—not before General Cos and five hundred men rode over it, however.

MORNING passed. Toward noon, Cos and the dragoons were espied, riding in to swell the force of Santa Anna. Houston roared as his men pointed them out, roared with laughter.

"Why, you fools, Santa Anna's marching some of his men out, around a swell of the prairie, and back in sight of us—to make us think he's getting reinforcements."

None the less, uneasiness reigned through the camp. Houston had his scouts out, obtained precise and rapid reports, knew exactly what he was doing. Half-way between the two camps was a large grove of timber—and upon this point, Sam Houston was preparing his whole stroke.

Noon came. By this time, the certain news that General Cos had arrived could no longer be disguised. What with one party and another coming in, Houston now had seven hundred men. He knew very well that Santa Anna had twice his number. And now, almost at the last moment, a new disaster threatened his whole plan.

His officers, backed by their men, demanded that he hold a council of war.

"All right, boys," and Houston chuckled. "Come right ahead and we'll hold it. But remember one thing! I'm giving the orders here, and by God, I'll shoot the first man who doesn't obey them—no matter who he is. Come along, all hands!"

The senior officers gathered. Faint heart was ruling again; the army was strongly posted, came the argument, and Santa Anna should be made to attack. That way, the great disparity in numbers would be discounted. Sam Houston said nothing at all, but listened in grim silence.

Two officers were for attack. The rest voted them down.

"All right, boys; much obliged," said Houston. "I ain't ready to give any orders yet, so I vote we all have a drink around."

No word yet from Deaf Smith. The afternoon wore on. Three o'clock came and passed. The scouts reported that the Mexican cavalry horses were being watered, that all the army, and the dragoons who had arrived that morning, were taking the usual siesta. Then Deaf Smith slipped into camp. He nodded to Houston. The latter swung around to his officers.

"All right, boys. Let's lick Santa Anna before he gets his boots on. Sherman! Burleson! Millard!"

He gave the orders rapidly. One started gasp, and they obeyed. The men obeyed. The cavalry under Millard mounted and rode forth, sweeping around openly to the attack of the Mexican left. Meantime, the Texians were massing forward, covered by the heavy timber from sight of the Mexican sentinels.

They burst forth. The Twin Sisters vomited grape into the camp ahead. Houston was with the charge. His voice rang out and led the rippling yell.

"Remember the Alamo! Remember Goliad!"

In wild, hasty alarm, the Mexicans attempted some formation. A ragged fire was opened. Not until the charging Texians were close, did their rifles answer the musketry—then death hailed into the ranks ahead. The dragoons broke and fled. The Mexican muskets were still stacked, to a large extent; the surprise of the moment was complete.

Houston's horse was shot under him. He mounted another, followed his yelling line of men over the breastworks and into the Mexican camp. Here a desperate defense was attempted, but it was crushed almost at once. A sudden agonizing pain, and Houston felt himself going down—ankle smashed and horse killed with the same ball.

Someone lent him a hand. He sat down and surveyed the frightful, incredible scene before him.

IT WAS no longer a battle, but a massacre. The Mexican cavalry had attempted to cross the bayou directly behind the camp, only to find it a hopeless morass; men and horses lay strewn everywhere, forming a causeway over which the Texians advanced in further pursuit. No rifles now. Bayonets and bowie knives alone were doing the work. A horrible wailing sound, the sound of men screaming in death, rose over the field. The Mexican infantry were in panic-stricken flight.

The Texians caught dragoon horses and went in pursuit. Such of the Mexican lancers as could, headed the wild flight for Vince's bridge. The pursuing avengers were close behind them—and there was no bridge. A few swam their horses across the stream, but more died there.

Far and wide, by bayou and prairie and oak-grove, the slaughter spread. No orders could check it; Texas had it coming. It was April 21st. Six weeks before, the Alamo had fallen. A month before, the Goliad butchery had taken place. Here were the men who had done those things, some of them, and the army went mad.

Sam Houston was carried back to his own camp. His wound was excessively painful, but exultation conquered pain. As the afternoon hours passed, his orders began to take effect. The lust of killing passed away, and prisoners dribbled in. By evening, six hundred were gathered together and guards posted.

Jubilation reigned supreme. Discipline was lost; the impossible had been accomplished, and now was the time to celebrate. From Santa Anna's private supplies came wine, champagne, delicacies of all kinds. His private effects were looted. His treasure chest was brought in, with ten thousand dollars in coin, and Sam Houston grinned, when they asked him what to do with it.

"Well, boys, I reckon you-all have earned it! And you ain't had no pay, so——"

Wild whoops went up. Food, liquor, victory! Mexican powder lighted the woods in boyish explosions. Songs were chorused up to the stars. With midnight, order was coming back, and things were got in hand.

MORNING found Sam Houston, at least, clear-headed. Despatches to write, couriers to get off, a million and one arrangements to make, plunder to be gathered—everything to be done, and his ankle smashed. Detachments were sent out to bring in all the prisoners possible. No sign of Santa Anna anywhere among the dead, nor among the captives. Part of the army went off to hunt, for deer were plentiful hereabouts.

The day passed. Toward dusk, two men came riding in with a shabby little fellow they had picked up down the bayou, scared to death and shedding tears. They started to turn him in among the prisoners, and a murmur arose.

"*El Presidente! El Presidente!*"

Better look into this, said somebody. Might be Santa Anna, even if he does deny it. Take him to the gin'ral.

Sam Houston, snatching brief reprieve from the consuming pain of his smashed ankle, was asleep. When they woke him and told him that Santa Anna had been brought in—well, there is more than one

story to that. Whether rough old Sam uttered the famous "mot" of General Cambronne at Waterloo, or whether he made the polite and polished bit of oratory that later history puts into his mouth, may be conjectured.

At all events, when he found that he really had the top prize in his hand, he was wide awake enough. For he, and no one else, realized what this prize could and would mean to Texas—and the utter mad folly that would lie in executing the murderer of Alamo and Goliad.

He sat late into the night, aflame with his vision. He still had seven hundred men, or a few less; and there were still Mexican generals galore, with thousands of picked men and artillery to north and south. There was one man those Mexicans would obey, and one only—the dictator, the President of all Mexico.

"Sit down and write," he muttered. "Sit down and write, *El Presidente*. Send the message to your generals. Tell them to evacuate Texas, and do it now. The alternative will not be pleasant matter for you to face, after Goliad——"

A greater victory there than any battle, if he could pull it off. This one little opium-sodden bit of flesh, whom he could strike out of existence with one hand—and with joy—could mean more to Texas in his abject cowardice than ten thousand men. So Sam Houston sat and dreamed into the night hours.

And his dreams came true.



THE TRAMMEL FORK PEARLS

By

RAYMOND S. SPEARS

*Author of Many Stories Both
of the Mountain People
and of the River
Bottoms*



Too Much Talk in the Postoffice Led to the Theft of an Unusual Mail Shipment—Twenty-five Thousand in Pearls

BUTTONSHELLS were scarce and pearl buying wasn't so good. Dolan Burton hadn't even made expenses when he came through the doorway on his return from a disappointing trip into the Indiana mussel fisheries, scuffling the mail the postman had thrust through the large slit in his front door. Advertisements, papers and magazines—he stooped and caught up the heap from the floor; he ought to have a box to catch it! He always forgot the need, though. Two weeks' deliveries made an imposing pile on his flat-top desk. His thought was of the bother, which showed his scant faith in Uncle Sam bringing him anything worth having.

He sat at his desk, began at the top and took whatever was next to his hand. He felt lonely. The money he had brought to the city to rent an office and establish himself as a fresh-water pearl buyer was about gone. Fortune had deserted him when he branched out. No one knew pearls better than he did. He was an experienced jeweler—young but competent. Luck had brought into his hands seven beautiful freshwater pearls on Scrup Fork

in the Illinois Basin. For three years he had traded, bought and sold, visited the pearling streams, making a good living. Then baroques, seeds, small shapes had paid his expenses—the shapes were all profits from which he made a stake. Surely \$8,000 above his field-money would carry him along!

Now he was living on his buying money. His occasional visits to the city had been profitable. The idea that he would find a good living there, with a headquarters covering the pearling of the limewater run offs had grown till he could not resist the fascinating venture. Now he was there—about to break.

His waste paper basket, a big toy carton from a peddlers' headquarters across the street, caught papers, advertisements, odds and ends most of his mail with only a glance. And then he found a box ten inches long, more than two inches wide and half an inch thick, sealed for letter postage. He shook it tentatively and felt weight inside. Opening the wrapper with a paper blade, he gazed at a typewriter cushion key box. Shoving the slide out, he found it full of tissue paper and little

card envelopes, each with a lump in it, and his hands trembled as he picked one of the crumpled containers to empty it onto a bare place on his desk.

A pearl! His jaw dropped. Never had he seen the like in the field. A quick roll and then a close examination in the north light—a touch with his tooth and he was weak. The gem was worth a thousand dollars! And when he had looked into each of the thirty tiny envelopes he was gasping for breath. Of course, in that frame of mind, his astonishment immeasurable, he couldn't even guess the values—but \$25,000 would be cheap!

A quick look at the wrapper, and he found the name, T. M. Lauson. This meant nothing to him, and neither did Pretty Kettle, Tennessee. The map showed him, however, that this was in The Knolls country, and he remembered having heard that two or three pearls of price had come out of there, but no fishery had been established for pearls or buttonshells.

"My luck has changed!" he reflected. "These'll put me on my feet——"

He found the letter with the pearls.

*Pretty Kettle, Tenn.
October 12th.*

Dear Mr. Burton:

I herewith send you some pretty tricks out of the creek here, which I am sure are pearls. My cousin who is a sheller and pearler in the Lake Nicormy Swamps gave me your little book about pearls and slugs, and so I am mailing you these which I hope you will be able to sell for me the way you done for him. Please let me know what you think of them but don't call them pearls because I don't want anybody to know about them. Call them mink skins, and if they are worth \$100 call it \$1, or \$500, make it \$5, and if they are very good you could ask me about otter skins, for I have my reasons. Yours sincerely,

Theda Macon Lauson

Burton did not even think of the opportunity such a shipment, not even registered,

had brought him. He turned to his typewriter, squirted a little oil on the ribbon spools and cleaned up the rest of his mail in a hurry. Then as the oil was light and had seeped pretty well through the ribbon, he wrote his answer to his correspondent, sister of one of those shellers and pearlbers he had known over in eastern Arkansas, back from New Madrid, but he couldn't tell which one.

His feeling of relief, hope revived, success beckoning again was immeasurable. The strain of weariness and dejection had grown upon him slowly; only when the incubus was gone did he realize its weight. For a little while he seemed unable to move, his breath shortened.

Behind him the door clicked; he felt the draft from the dark and narrow hallway; surprised, he cocked his head, listening.

"Hi-i-i!" a soft voice exclaimed. "Hyar they be! Keep yo' haid thataway! Don't move, suh!"

Frozen, he felt the cold ring of a short-gun against the back of his neck and a left hand reached past his shoulder and clutched up the little envelopes, a dozen of them, in the first grab, and then the others till all of them had followed the first handful. Stunned, he could do nothing. It was a small weapon, a low caliber, he could tell by the feel.

"If'n yo' look I'll cut yo' throat—have to," the voice declared. "Now put yo' hands back—thataway."

THE next instant he was being bound, his hands to the legs of the chair by stout cord. Something was jammed into his mouth, and he was gagged, and blindfolded. A minute later he heard the door close behind him as the latch clicked shut. He began to pull and struggle, but though the scoundrel had worked swiftly, he had tied good knots and done a thorough job. His office was at the end of a hallway; around in a jog where no one came but those to see him. He might remain there for hours, days, indefinitely, for he was seldom there, and he had come unseen that

morning, he recalled. In his ears rang the chortling satisfaction of the holdup who had stolen those pearls belonging to his customer.

His position was desperate. Getting his fingers around to where he could feel the cord on his right wrist with his fingertips, he recognized the kind—it was a trot line, white, hard-twist cotton rope used in making guys for nets, for fishermen's tents and even for skiff anchor cables. Men had been hung on those light lines! With difficulty he suppressed the feeling of panic terror. His heart was thumping, and with the gag in his mouth, it was hard to breathe fast enough through his nostrils.

"I must keep calm. I mustn't get excited," he told himself, sagging determinedly against the high back of his swivel chair. Then he discovered that by shrinking down he could scrape at the knot across the back of his head. Little by little he worked the tie up and with relief shook the scarf clear and spat out the wad of cloth he had used to wipe his typewriter.

He could yell now, but night had fallen. The chance of anyone hearing him at that hour was scant. True, some of the occu-



pants of the office building occasionally stayed late, but usually they were gone by this hour—at least six o'clock, and perhaps later. He could not tell.

His wrists had been tied to the bracket of the seat. Now that he was able to breathe freely, see around, feel sure of making his escape in the morning, when his yells would be heard, he slacked the cords and by straining and twisting about, he presently reached a knot which yielded to his thumb and finger nails. At midnight he was free, with deep red lines around his wrists which were burned and scraped. And he stood now in full realization of his

predicament. One of the oldest of alibis, that of being bound by hold-ups when other people's money and valuables were lost, had been worn threadbare. Insurance companies, commercial interests, bankruptcy courts, all questioned those secret robbers who come and go unseen.

Dolan Burton looked at his desk. There was the carbon of the letter he had written to Theda Macon Lauson; he looked around for the envelope in which he had placed the original, ready to mail out. It was nowhere in sight though the letter the woman had sent him was there, under the carbon paper. The outlaw had not discovered it, or at least had not taken it with him.

The pearl buyer reread his answer:

Dear Miss Lauson:

I have this day received from you the mink skins as per yours of recent date, October 12th. I have as yet been unable to appraise them, but from the cursory examination I believe that they should range well above \$5 per, as they are apparently full prime and first quality, unusually dark and lustrous in mink skins from your locality. Of course, otter skins are very uniform in winter prime grades, north and south, and I judge what ones of this species you have are of superior grade. I shall examine these skins with utmost interest and report to you, immediately.

If you prefer, I shall sell them on a 10% commission basis, which is probably the most satisfactory way, since the trade is considerable and in this quality it may take some little time to arrange satisfactory sales.

*Thanking you for the business, I am
Very sincerely yours,
Dolan Burton.*

He had informed her in her code that the pearls were worth thousands of dollars, "well above \$500 per." Now he had lost them. The bandit was gone and there had been no outcry. No matter what he said, how frank his avowal, he would be a person

suspect. The woman had found an amazing pocket of freshwater pearls and mailed him ones worth more than \$25,000 in a commonplace container. Trust like that in Uncle Sam's Post Office and in men in his business ought to be justified. The thoroughfare on which his office was, being a well known jewelry center, was protected in various ways from invasion by crooks. The bandit himself had braved the rule that a criminal should not appear there under penalty of being picked up for vagrancy.

DOLAN BURTON carefully looked over the office, but he knew he would find nothing there that would help him. The invader had worn thin rubber gloves through which no fingerprints could possibly show.

"But he left a clue," Burton reflected. "He left a lot of clues."

The trot line was significant. The pieces of old cord were gray instead of white because of age. One piece had a loop spliced in the end. The tangle cord harked back to any one of a hundred communities on tributaries of the Mississippi or its major streams, like the Ohio, Arkansas, Upper Mississippi. Another clue was over against the bottom of the wainscoting. In his eagerness to pocket all those little envelopes the raider had dropped one. He had picked it up, found it empty and, wadding it into a little ball, he had thrown it down. The pearl which had rolled out of the stiff linen paper container had gone against the wall and stopped, unnoticed.

The pearl was like a large pea in size. It would weigh more than twelve pearl grains at the least. Its value, depending on its luster, was problematical, but Burton wasn't thinking of that when he put the glass on it, studying the color, the network of horny matter and lime. Just that kind of luster, just that loveliness of white, with a faintest of pink hues flaring through the translucent depths was new to him. Every stream, every source of pearls, has its own peculiar mark whereby the experts trace

it. Burton knew before long that he had never seen a pearl like this one before.

A new pearl stream might have been discovered, though he knew he had not seen all the kinds of pearls produced in the hundreds of known streams. The beauty was like that of White River, Caney Fork, Clinch River, and New Jersey. Farther south the pearls grow faster and longer in a season, and farther north they grow more slowly and the layers of shell were finer, thinner and generally lovelier.

Burton formerly had always carried insurance on his pearls, but the policy had lapsed. Many business men had let loss and theft insurance go. Most of them were like Burton without anything much to insure. He was almost unable to believe his experience. The trotline and pearl were proof enough however, that he had not endured an ugly nightmare. He went to the office of the Carcajou Investigations, Inc., and frankly told Manager Drenn his story, showing the investigator the pearl which had been dropped and the two pieces of cord. Drenn examined the pearl through a glass. It was a beauty, and probably the smallest in the collection which had been sent to Burton to be sold.

Drenn examined closely the deep lines around the pearl buyer's wrist, and to a question Burton described the knots, and how he managed to slip them because his hands were flexible.

"Well, what can I do?" Drenn inquired.

"Those pearls are stolen goods," Burton answered, "I don't know what to suggest. You don't owe me anything, but this is a jewelers' trade matter. I thought perhaps I ought to tell you. This puts me in a bad hole. I shouldn't be surprised if the case came to you presently from the other side. You know when a customer submits pearls for sale to a pearl buyer, as these were submitted, he has to take care of them."

"You never asked her for them?"

"Never heard of her! But her cousin, she wrote me, told her about me," Burton said, "I had a good—a good reputation. I'd satisfied the pearlers. Now I've let

me in for \$25,000 or so worth of suspicion."

"The door was locked behind you?" Drenn asked.

"I unlocked it with my key, and didn't set the latch to work the outside knob. I heard the click—this fellow had a key to it."

"Looks bad for you," Drenn remarked. "What are you going to do?"

"Look for those pearls," the victim answered. "I've told you what the thing looks like. If they show up here, if you'd let me know at Pretty Kettle, I'd be obliged to you."

"Don't use your own name," Drenn remarked. "I'll look around for you, here. You notified the police?"

"No, I didn't," Burton shook his head. "This thief'll watch the papers and if he doesn't see anything about this, he'll get to worrying, perhaps more than if it was spread all over the front pages."

"Yes, that works with some of them," Drenn nodded, and gave him some suggestions, advice, to use or not if conditions warranted.

DOLAN BURTON had canvassed hundreds of miles of pearl and button-shell rivers in search of baroques, seeds, slugs, shapes of all kinds. He knew swamp brakes and mountain hardwoods. The more he reflected on the kinds of regions where he had been to buy pearls, the less he could foresee what to expect when he went to Pretty Kettle to find who had sent him those beautiful pearls and whether he could pick up a trail which would lead him to the bandit who had known he had the gems before he did himself. The scoundrel had located Burton's office in town and come in, perhaps not expecting to find the buyer there, perhaps not realizing that the pearls were actually among the mail on the floor. Fortune had favored the robber, whether he had worked by chance or by plan.

Pretty Kettle was on the Trammel Fork. Burton thought of going up the regular route into the valley whence the packet of

pearls had come. He changed his mind, however, and took the railroad into Sourmash, over the State Line. Here he left the train and went on the mail stage into the fastnesses of Candle Court. This was just over the divide, seventeen miles from Pretty Kettle. The highway map didn't show any roadway over the mountain, but the stranger had a compass and camping outfit in a packbasket. He claimed to be a game hunter, and spent a day at Candle Court, asking the gunsmith in the hardware store about the high range.

"I don't want to go where bad friends might be made," Burton said. "I'm new, here. I mind my own business. I don't want to know anything that might bother people. Mainly I want to keep on the spurs and hogbacks, camping where I'll find turkeys, deer, squirrels and maybe quail in old clearings."

The gunsmith was tall, gaunt and friendly. He walked with a perceptible limp and he watched his visitor with a shrewd directness. He had been a rider in several of the Western States and long ago he had gone out into the Big Range where he worked cows. He had left in a hurry, but presently after some thirty years he had returned to Ol' Kaintuck, broadened by experience on plateaus, in vast basins, in Bad Lands and open country. He could tell a stranger where to go and how to avoid trouble.

"If'n you keep on the high backs," he said, "yo' won't git into trouble along the runs. Course, if'n yo' happen to meet a scouter, he mout think something. That's one thing yo' cain't count out, no how. A man keepin' out of touch with the law is sho' apt to be sensitive. Personally, I'd rather hunt where game is scarcer."

Burton reached the top of the world. The scene was a narrow razor-back ridge with slopes on either side that extended down and out for mile after mile of forested valley, spurs, ridges and varied mountain lands. A pearl buyer would just naturally keep in the bottoms along the

streams, but anyone hiding out was more apt to go high up and stay there.

THERE was Pretty Kettle and the sparkling flow of the green Trammel Fork. The settlement was on a flat bench along a stillwater. Where the steep of the valley came down to the water banks, the slope was covered with timber. The stream and the valley road went through farm clearings of fifty or sixty acres and stumpy pastures wherever there was a flat on one or both sides of the stream.

Cabins, frame houses that moonshine built, a street with several stores, or commissaries, a drug store, a hotel, an over-shot gristmill, and other structures for perhaps five or six hundred population rested there. It didn't look like a community that would mail out \$25,000 worth of pearls—but it did seem to be the kind of a place where people lived who would seal just such pretty little tricks in a box and mail them, kindness of Uncle Sam, without registering, to a pearl buyer off yonder in the big city.

And somewhere thereabouts was a shrewd, daring, unscrupulous scoundrel who would have ideas and use them, even though they required a stickup with a shotgun and the theft by robbery of a fortune. Here men struggled to make a living and some few in their desperation and their pride stopped at nothing; they robbed, cheated and killed; and insults called for deadly reprisals.

Through his binoculars Burton watched Pretty Kettle, and at sundown he shouldered his pack and went down the point into the gap where the trail crossed the Divide and followed the road into the valley just above town, arriving at the boarding house, Hotel No. 2 of Pretty Kettle, kept by Kumby, a genial, burly, black whiskered man with bright blue eyes and a direct gaze that twinkled—seeing everything.

"I reckon we c'n accommodate yo'," he smiled. "'Tain't Co'rt week. No special doings. What yo' packin'? Looks like yo'

mout be soldierin' an' lost yo' army, suh. No 'fense, Strangeh! We 'low to have our leetle joke yeah on Trammel Creek, 'suh."

Supper was ready. Kumby sat down with the newcomer just to be sociable. Thus he learned that his patron was chiefly a Yankee, but his name was Wright, his father's people having lived over at the Kentucky-Virginia line ever since time began, practically.

"My excuse for coming along the Blue Ridge and Cumberlands is just that I like to hunt, camp out, visit folks along," Burton covered his ideas, and Kumby said he had traveled in his day, out West, Texas, Colorado, and even as far as Oregon.

"I was worried and kept moving—jes' a leetle shootin' scrape is all. A good lawyer cleared me on se'f-defense grounds, presently. Ched Lauson's legally reliable, fine, educated an' honorable. Gains ev'y point, neveh loses a possible case. If he'd be'n ambitious, not lovin' Pretty Kettle, he'd be'n big in the high co'rts, but he's content to live in Pretty Kettle, ride circuit, satisfied jes' to live."

"He's married?" the visitor inquired.

"He's a widower, but he's got feminine management," the man said, "his daughter Theda Macon Lauson. My land, she practically raised herse'f to a liberal education, riding, shooting, co-edding, up the mountangs, down the valleys, university an' experience school graduated! She's a right an' lef' handed shot, rifle, scatter an' short-guns, suh. Ve'y fine, friendly, cleveh, an' honorable young lady, but rampageous, suh. She's a dep'ty sher'f now an' totin' a bench warrant fo' Bald Knob Pete Stubborns."

"What has he done?"

"Jes' meanness, interference, all around cussedness!" Kumby sighed. "He's one of them mountang Hill Billies that gives ev'ybody a bad name, back thisaway. Mist' Lauson defended him in his latest but one homicide case. Pete handed his attorney \$100 cash in hand an' took the rest of his law on tick. Lauson acquitted him—a sho' close squeak. Now Mist' Lauson's a ve'y easy going gentleman, financially,

but that gal of his is plumb disgusted an' don't stand no economic nonsense. She told that Pete Stubbors he'd git the worst of hit, cheatin' her daddy, an' he jes' laughed. Huh, he practically growed up parallel to Theda! He's 'bout five yeahs older'n she is, but yo' know, that's jes' 'bout how far a man is behind them women, mentally. He don't know hit, though.

"Co'rse, Pete was real good-natured, calm, indiff'rent till his pap gits killed up, when he comes back an' self-defends his fambly, poppin' oveh Juck Skimpin—an ornery bushwhacker—savin' his fambly the \$1,000 reward on him, thataway. Then havin' tasted blood Pete killed up two fellers—moonshiners an' chicken thieves. Nobody said nothin' 'bout that. They were Juck's pals an' had talked they'd kill Pete. Then Pete stretched his se'f-defending a



leettle too fur, killin' a feller in obscure circumstances one night on the way home from a dance. He got indicted an' Mist' Lauson acquitted him in jig-time. But hit left kind of a feelin' in the famblies, and theh's come two-three otheh killin's that gits tried out, an' yo' know yose'f public sentiment don't stand on'y about jes' so much. An' now this last killin' gits him rewarded \$1,000, daid er alive. Hit'd be kind of a joke if Theda c'lected her daddy's due-fee of \$900 killin' his client, now

wouldn't hit? Anyhow, Pete jes' laughs, sayin' he'll marry her yit. She jes' boils!"

BURTON was sure glad he had given his name as Orton Wright. After some uneasy sleep, he went to the post office and received mail addressed to Orton Wright—papers and magazines he'd subscribed for. Manager Drenn told him attempts to sell freshwater pearls had been made by a soft-spoken, proud and handsome man, but one who never came back twice. Drenn added:

"Obviously, he knew nothing of the pearl trade, nor about pearls, and we found where he had left his shabby hotel before we could contact him. He signed himself Rhule Plamer of Ozark, Missouri. Nobody of that name lives in or near Ozark. He's a Hill Billy, and bad."

On his way back to the boarding house, Burton met a tall, rangy slender young woman with wide, frank blue eyes and the swing of an outdoor person. She had a repeating shotgun over her left elbow and a belt of shells from which dangled a holster for a long-barreled automatic pistol. She was square-shouldered, tight-bosomed, and smiling just naturally, her gem-blue eyes surveying the stranger from beneath a wide-brimmed man's hat of light gray. She wore laced hunting boots, knee-length walking skirt and fine gauntlet gloves.

"I understan' Mist' Wright that yo're a Yankee from 'way off yonder," she stopped him. "What kind of a reputation has Dolan Burton, the pearl buyer, got theh'bouts?"

Thus queried, he swallowed, blinked and hesitated.

"Well, of course," he frowned, "the East's a very large place. I don't know lots of people there. Mr. Burton has been there only two-three years. I understand he's been getting along tolerable——"

"I jes' wanted to know." She shrugged her shoulders. "Just so he's reliable, I'm

satisfied. Somebody said you were from Down East, so I inquired."

"Sure sorry I can't be more explicit."

"Oh, that's all right, Mist' Wright. You're one of those old Johnson county-Pound Gap Wrights?"

"No-o, not lately," he shook his head. "My father was in those parts. He married a Yankee girl and moved up north. I was borned out west in Ohio, but been back east, and around. I'm just sporting around, hunting game—I see you're shooting, too. Quail I suppose, squirrels, perhaps turkey?"

"No, suh—I'm loaded with buckshot." She shook her head. "Around town I prefer a shotgun—buckshot are more reliable and less apt to keep on going aftch they've done their business. Out around, I pack a rifle. Ranges are pretty far in the hills, sometimes."

"Oh, you hunt deer then? Big game?"

"Oh, theh's some deer!" she assented. "Then there's razorbacks, which I kill me when convenient. What I'm interested in, Stranger, is did you meet a tall, handsome man with a three-cornered face and a mirthless grin when you crossed the mountain back, yesterday? He still claims the name—Bald Knob Pete Stubbors."

"No, I saw no one." He shook his head thoughtfully.

"You're sure lucky," she remarked. "The sheriff has a thousand dollars reward on him, for meanness. Before he went bad, Pete was fairly respectable, but now he's moonshining, killing for hire, and he don't even pay his lawyer. I reckon he figures lawyers can't do much for him now, the way things are. No use wasting money on 'em."

While she talked, she gazed steadily at the stranger she knew as Wright, watching him as if for a sign. Buying pearls, he had met these mountain people. A mistake would be costly. Here was the young woman who had sent him those marvelous pearls. Her hands were long, her fingers slim and yet he could see the telltale scars showing that she, herself, had opened the

mussels and cut herself on the sharp shells. Probably she knew from his letter that her pearls were worth many thousands of dollars; how could he ever tell her they had been stolen from him? All he could do to make amends was place himself at her service, bonded for life trying to pay back to her what he had lost.

"Of course, Miss Lauson, I'm a stranger in these parts," he said. "I'm just a wild-crafter, nature lover and sportsman. I'm quite poor. But if I could be of service, I'd surely be glad to help."

"You hunt squirrels, Dicky birds, cottontails," she jeered him, "I don't reckon you'd evch even dream of hunting a man!"

NOT meeting her searching gaze he thought of one man he would hunt to the ends of the world and bring to chains, prison or his tomb without compunction—the scoundrel who had ruined his business and his profession! Next to getting that rascal, he would wish to show his willingness to make amends to the young woman whose loss, though she did not know it, was as great or greater than his own.

"I never expected to turn man-hunter," he admitted, "and I hope you won't mistake my meaning if I say it would be a novel experience for me, if I could do it legally. Of course, a man has to learn how to hunt men, the same as hunting anything else."

"That's so." She squinted thoughtfully. "Suppose I took my rifle and we hunted potluck up yonder on the long mountang? Don't brag none of what you're intending. Neveh mind a snack—I've got one put up. You got your mail. Go to the boarding house, act ordinary, and tell Fallis you're strolling up the points learning the country. Follow the run up till you find a sugar maple tree like a footlog across the gully. Wait theh, suh!"

He found the tree and sat on it with patience. A whistle and a look—there was the lawyer's daughter, carrying a .30-30 carbine and a big gamebag over her shoulder. He took it, and she led the way up

the spur of the mountain and two hours later they were up the steep slope on the crest.

Along the extreme top of the long razor-back mountain was a wagon road used when high water made the valley roads impassable and the fords were too deep to swim or wade. There she turned westward and they strolled along, side by side, his rifle in his left elbow crook, hers in her right elbow hook, walking noiselessly in the roadway which the wind had blown clear of autumnal leaves.

"Down theh," she nodded into the deeps of Trammel Creek valley, "I couldn't get even a deputy sheriff let alone a citizen to go with me, hunting that Bald Knob Pete. They're afraid of him. He shoots from the bresh. For nine years he's been killing-mean. He was seventeen when he killed his first man, at a dance oveh a girl. In college he prob'ly paid his way selling moonshine. Oh, he's sly! I always suspicioned he did the shooting in Thunderland Café, one night of a killing theh. When he came home he could sure chemistry his stilling. He made and spent money free-handed these years, since. Hot-headed, rambunctious and plumb careless, he fell out with Tuck Wraggan, his partner. Tuck carried a girl to a party in Thunderland Gap, and Bald Knob was theh, and they went at it. Tuck died. If my father hadn't defended him, Bald Knob sure would have gone to the electric chair. As it was, he come clear again on self-defense. He's been cleared less'n three terms of court—and now he's rewarded, like I said, \$1000 for killing Ruben Dickers of the Thunderland Café; shooting him down in cold blood for \$100 cash in hand. He's murdered once too often. I told him if'n he didn't pay up that \$900 he owes my pap, I'd c'lect it, with \$100 interest.

"A woman c'lect that reward?" he laughed. "I'm going to collect from you, instead."

"That made me plumb indignant. He's got four-five hideouts back on this mountang, 'sides places he c'n go in—stillhouses,

cabins, po'r white shacks. Theh's root-diggers, fortune hunters, trappers out around. All we got to do is locate him, an' if we cain't catch him alive, shoot him daid."

"I'd hate to think of your being around—he might shoot," her hunting partner said.

"I reckon he'll shoot at you, first," she answered. "That'll give me a chance to locate him and do some shooting myself."

"I'll try to spoil his aim, if I have the chance," Burton remarked. "Probably he's a good, cool shot!"

"Oh, yes, indeed!" she spoke admiringly. "He uses a terrible fast bullet, though, and it flies to pieces the minute it hits anything, wood, bones, or anything like that. Blows a hole out of a man you could put a muskmelon into. They mess things up but his ammunition is irregular—he misses oftener than he hits if he's any distance away. That's a point in our favor. He's careless and impatient. If he's waiting to bushwhack a man he's apt to quit afteh three-four hours, even if hit means a hundred dollars to him. He neglected four-five men we know about thataway. Hit's come time to eat our snack." She looked at her wrist watch. "Just keep watch around while I'm spreading our eats."

"Perhaps Stubbers has gone to Texas," Burton suggested.

"No, suh, I don't expect," she shook her head. "I thought I'd lost him. He was gone three weeks, nobody seeing him. I 'lowed maybe I'd run him out the country, myself. I'd told him we had to have that \$900. He kinda laughed. He said likely he'd pick it up around, somewhere. He was just mocking me. He showed back again last week. He'd been away off yonder. I heard it straight. I wouldn't put it above him to rob a bank or train or payroll."

THEDA LAUSON knew the mountains like a fugitive from justice. Her head turned in the restless, searching

watchfulness of those who walk in a land where men shoot from the brush at an enemy. Her voice was low and clear. At every squirrel jump, flutter of wings, stir or cry of the wilds she was alert and ready. Her companion listened to the indignation in her strained voice.

"Tain't the money bothers me!" she gave this stranger an odd confidence. "It's just an excuse. Bald Knob is bragging. Some men are thataway. Two men came courtin' me. One's a fox hunter and Bald Knob sized him up. One shot an' Carter took to his toes. The next an' that man was bounding down the mountang. Shu-u, I never saw a man so comical scairt up! But Bald Knob didn't show himself to me. I'd 'a' killed him! But I didn't get the chance. I had my revolver, but just out of college, I was out of practice. Now——"

She drew a revolver that looked like a .38 or .45 but when she shot he recognized it as a .22-caliber, and a pheasant, a ruffed grouse, flopped down out of a spruce-pine tree onto the dry leaves beside the trail. Theda Lauson could shoot now! She put the bird in the game sack.

"Bald Knob wouldn't be along here," she explained her shot. "If he's on this stretch of mountang he's on the Footstool. He c'n watch the valley road for miles there. No telling where he is, but he don't fool me, none. He showed himself across the valley in those hump-heads just yesterday. That's an old trick. He shows himself just before he moves away off yonder. If he didn't come here, he's gone to the head springs of Trammel. Or maybe he's gone down into Yellow Water."

Presently they could see the castellated limestone ledges and knobs ahead of them. Theda left the trail to skulk along the side mountain for a quarter of a mile, following hog runways. When she came up to the crest again, they crossed the divide in a little sag and she searched down through the breaks among the pillars and heaps of stone. They discovered no one and they stopped on a ledge with a sheer drop of a hundred feet or more down a gray cliff.

There amid the shrubs they could look down on Trammel Creek, the valley highway, and for ten miles along the farm widenings and woods slopes. This was the Footstool.

"Let's eat," she suggested, "but keep your eyes peeled. He might be coming this evening to sit here. If he traveled all last night, he'll sleep this morning and begin to stir around this evening. I don't reckon you know how serious this is, Mr. Wright."

"Don't I?" he chuckled. "I've been around, Miss Lauson."

"What doing—scouting troubles?"

On the tip of his tongue he checked in time the answer, "Pearl buying!" The shock of so nearly betraying himself made him tense.

"No—I'm hunting, you know," he answered quietly. "I never hunted a man before, but I've been in rough country. I thought I'd hunt wild turkeys here in the Blue Ridge Cumberlands. But it's like that when a man goes into new country. He expects one thing and finds another. Personally, I take what comes."

"Plenty will be coming yo'r way!" she spoke absently. "Jes' wait'll Bald Knob hears we all are traipsin' around in these high trails together. He'll come like a buck to a salt lick!"

She watched his expression out of the corners of her eyes, and he laughed. A flutter of a smile broke the determined lines of her countenance. Somehow she had veiled her desperation and recklessness, but now he could realize the grim hate and intention that drove her. The mountain outlaw had claimed her for his own. He had driven from her the friends and suitors she might have had. No one dared be seen with her now. She had inveigled this stranger into the peril of the mountain bushwhacker, if only to seek and fight the scoundrel in the wilderness. Nor could Burton object! He must expiate his own misfortune in her service. If she had obtained the pearl money, she would be rich, independent.

"He watches you, spies on you, Miss Lauson?" he asked.

"When he isn't delivering he's watching me," she answered. "I go down the creek, fishing, and theh he'll be. I go to a dance, and he claims to carry me home, no matter who I go with. I ride out on a bridle path, and theh he'll come. Like a panther cat he circles around me. Oh, I'm desperate! If it wasn't for Pap I'd light out. I'd go till salt water stopped me. I'd scout to Texas or Oregon or Florida, but Pap needs me. Pap's wonderful. No man knows law like he does. They claim he influences and corrupts the courts, but he neveh does. He shapes the testimony, he refers to the precedents, he states his case. He's honest, according to the Law. Maybe 'tain't always Justice! With him it's a game. But he stands back of his clients. He's defended in more'n two hundred cases of homicide. He never had a man hung, or executed. He counts on the fingers of two hands those who served till they died in jail. Even terrible plain, aggravating killings he's twisted around so his clients looked reasonable and turning them loose seemed fair-minded. But he isn't practical, living. He needs me around to care for him. So Bald Knob Pete figures he'll get me, fair or foul, when his day comes. I'm a-feared—a-feared of him. His game is just to keep us poor, starving us. He reckons all is fair in love or war. But I'd take up with a stranger 'fore I would with him. Theh's a chance a stranger mout be honorable—a slim chance, perhaps, but I know Bald Knob Pete's a scoundrel, an' mean."

"I hope you're playing in good luck!" Burton Wright remarked, eating a chicken drumstick.

SHE burst into a chuckling little laugh, looked at him shrewdly and nodded with a satisfaction and approval she had not shown before.

"Mr. Wright, I just knowed you looked reliable," she assured him. "Probably it sounds insulting, suh. I've told you how

come I tolled you up around, thisaway, risking your life. Don't fool yo'se'f! Bald Knob Stubbers'd talk soft, gentle and friendly but he'd shoot you like a dog now. The word'll go all over I favored you. They'll tell we hunted these mountains thisaway. You can go get your pack, suh, and scurry away. If you stay in Trammel Creek country that'll mean war. You never been hunted to the death. I don't reckon you eveh killed a man, did you?"

"I never thought of it, except——" he hesitated.

"You've been sure 'nough bitter?" she asked quietly.

"Yes, I was robbed," he answered slowly. "A man could have stolen my own property, and I would have had to take it. When he robbed me of a fortune trusted to me, I could think of nothing but killing him. I never could pay back what I'd lost. My life was ruined. I don't even know who robbed me."

"Hyah you wouldn't kill even the man who ruined you and you risk your life for



a stranger!" She gazed at him oddly. "Dying for a mountang gal wouldn't do yo' any good."

"Perhaps it'd do her good," he suggested. "The Law'd go after Bald Knob right, killing a stranger come as the guest of the mountain country. People would be more indignant about that than about someone they know being killed up. Some would say the local man needed killing, but the stranger had never harmed anyone!"

"Who all told you 'bout us mountang folks, suh?" she asked.

"It stands to reason," he answered. "Where among the people you know is there one who blames Bald Knob Stubbers for wanting you? But he wouldn't be fair, killing an outsider——"

"I reckon you aren't so ignorant as you pretend," she frowned. "If'n you are a detective, like some claim, you'll be right sorry, suh. Well, we betteh git to go—keep your eyes peeled. Any minute that killing Bald Knob is liable to look over his sights at you, Mist' Wright."

SHE repacked the lunch bag, considerably diminished now, and they went back up to the hogback trail. Ready for action, he watched the curtain of the forest. He heard a flock of wild turkeys in the acorns down a hardwood spur. He would have turned back eastward, heading toward Pretty Kettle, but she turned the other way. It was three hours after noon. He was surprised, but she led the way for hours away from the little mountain town. The sun was shining in their faces. The back swayed down and widened out. Sunset was coming.

Then they heard music, fiddle tunes in mountain folk dance melodies, lingering and lively. Theda Lauson turned her head, listening. She left the high-water road and circled. They came to a clearing of four or five acres, surrounded by a fence of rails and poles to keep the hogs out. Sitting on the balcony was a man alone, playing and jumping to the measure in his chair, lifting his booted-foot and pounding the split board floor. The young woman chuckled and her companion laughed under his breath.

"He plays for all our dances," she said. "He's Sawlog Bramer. He married rich, but his wife makes him come up yeah to play. That fiddle of his is four hundred years old, and I've heard it two miles in the night. He listens fine on the edge of his clearing, don't you think? His high notes are like bird songs in the candle-light."

They watched and listened till the sun

went down. Then Theda hailed as Sawlog tightened a string. He stretched his long neck, looking, and then invited them in, bowing and courtly.

"Why, Miss Theda!" he greeted her. "I'm sho' honored."

She introduced *Orton Wright*, and while she took the raw material for supper, the two men sawed some fireplace chunks with a crosscut, and in the log cabin, when the dark came, they sat down to a small turkey gobbler the fiddler had spitted over a pan, having hotbread, gravy, fruit butters, jams, sauces, jellies. Sawlog explained he had brought up a buckboard load of supplies, practicing for a big dance to come on Thanksgiving. His wife, he explained, was sensitive in her ears, and the family dogs howled so much, it wasn't any consolation playing down on the farm. This was just his cabin on the mountain for practice.

The cabin had one room, four beds, and fixings for a considerable of a family.

"You're always expecting visitors, Sawlog," Theda jeered him. "All kinds of visitors!"

"Yas'm," he acknowledged. "Yo' dad's met plenty of his'n clients right yeah by my fiahplace. An' many a gal's be'n stoled down the mountang road if'n her folkses objected. Yo' ain't the fustest gal that come yeah, co'rtin', friendlyin', jes' speculatin'——"

She burst into a light laugh. The old fiddler who had played at a thousand dances and a thousand frolics could hold his talk up with anyone. The fiddle-music cabin was a convenient meeting place for all his friends, outlaw scouts and their relations, lovers and their sweethearts, moon-shiners and their customers, attorneys and their fugitive clients. The rawhide hogskin latch string was always hanging out. Sometimes enough people were there to have a dancing or a revival meeting party, if an exhorter happened along.

"I c'n play hallelujah an' glory music, same as step-light an' singin' sprees," Sawlog declared, "but I neveh expected yo'uns yeah, Theda. Not with Mist' Bald Knob

Stubbors scoutin' out, I didn't. He don't cyar what he does, an' he's brash, mean, drinkin' his own products, now. I neveh know when he's comin' er goin'. He's liable any minute to drap in. Yo' know how often I've toted yo' word he'd meet yo' hyar, gal. An' yo' never did meet him. What if'n he comes tonight?"

"If'n he don't, Uncle, yo' needn't tell him we come," she said.

"Course, I neveh tell—not these yeah special occasions," he assured her. "But he's killin' mean, des'prit. He's braggin' he's stealin' yo' presently, now. I sho' hated to see yo'uns come in tonight."

"You're expecting him?" she asked quickly.

He turned and looked at the door.

"I neveh know," he shook his head, "but he mout come in any minute. 'Ceptin' he was away three weeks back a bit, he's be'n yeah ev'y two weeks, a Wednesday, a Tuesday, a Thursday, same as a mink er weasel circles 'round twice a moon. If'n yo'd come alone, he'd jes' laughed. But he's drinkin' Corn, 30-70, peach er apple brandy—'tain't often he draws a sober breath. Lately, he's jes' be'n reckless. Course, with that thousand dollars reward on him, he's livin' all he can. He neveh knows when he'll be shot down. That makes a man bad, Miss Lauson!"

"It makes a bad man worse," she remarked.

SAWLOG Bramer played softly on his fiddle, filling the cabin with the mystery of unforgettable folk music of the ages, tunes that gripped the thoughts and made the nerves echo, echoed the days of old into the dreams of the future. The two visitors forgot to talk and Burton lost himself in reveries. When Bramer loosed the strings and hung up the fiddle and the bow, with a start the visitor realized that the firewood had burned down to coals and a chill draft had come through faulty chinking among the logs. He started up to look around. Theda Lauson had slipped away and gone to bed in the shadowy corner.

Burton took the bed over next to the fireplace and the fiddler went to his own in the other corner. In the quiet they heard an owl hooting and the scratching of a weasel hunting squeaking mice in the attic and along the top-plate logs around the shingled-roof rafters, all according to the mountain ways. When Burton awakened in the morning, the young woman was kneeling before the fireplace cooking corn cakes and frying pork sausage, making breakfast. He swung out and finished dressing himself, brought in a bucket of water and filled the coffee pot. The old fiddler awakened with a start, rubbed his eyes and dressed himself. His shrewd old eyes looked at the visitor he knew as Wright and at Attorney Lauson's girl, shaking his head.

"I reckon yo're a Yankee," he remarked. "Course, 'tain't none of my business."

"I was born up north," Burton answered. "Wright is the old family name. My folks came partly from Old Virginia, up around Pound Gap, on the State Line, partly they came from 'way down East, my mother being out of New England."

"I knowed it," Bramer said, "excusen my suspicions, suh. A feller said a strange had come huntin' turkey an' game in the mountangs. Yo' came by way of Candle Court. That old gunsmith, theh, betteh hesitate the way he talks. He mout tell the wrong one too much, not mindin' his own business."

"All I asked him was about game hunting," Burton declared. "I asked him how to keep clear of anything that a stranger ought not to know."

"Yo' say yo' di-id! Course, a strange has to mind his'n's own business hereaway. More Federals an' detectors come into the mountangs than eveh gets away ag'in. Well, I don't neveh turn anybody away. I'm neutral. I play for ev'y body, Unions, Rebels, Guerillas. If'n I begin a piece, I finish it. When the boys git to fussin' I keep a playin'. I've seen 'em fistin', shootin', clubbin', stabbin', kickin'—mark-in' time to my tunes. That last fuss when

Tuck Wraggan was killed up, they slammed and banged away the in Thunderland Gap. They was at hit all ways, fists and chair laigs and guns! They jes' squandered their bullets. I thought I'd stop one fore them two fellers did. Then Tuck pitched down, the killer yelled, 'S'long, Sawlog!' an' he scouted out. They drug Tuck oveh into the corner an' went to dancin' ag'in. My lan', but theh's sho' Devil-may-cyar theh in Thunderland Gap! So I played on an' on, an' Tuck sat in the corner, grinnin' an' grinnin'! Well, he went out in a dance. If'n I'd been killed, I'd died with my bow in hand. I live fo' music; I'd die fo' music! That's all I know, jes' tunes. I don't ast to know any more."

AFTER breakfast when the day was light, Theda packed the game bag full of leavings, but left two pheasants and two rabbits she had killed the day before. The fiddler wanted them to stay, for there was a storm coming, a cold and sleety rain, he said, but she wouldn't. They went on east along the mountain back.

"Keep ready, suh!" she warned her companion. "I feel in my bones Bald Knob Stubbors is near-close. Yo' heard Bramer say he circles around like a weasel or panther, every two weeks. He's due now. He's through here. Maybe he'll hole down in rough weather. Rain er sleet is coming. Mister, I'm treating you mean, risking your life and abusing you, raiding around and the rain is beginning. Feel it? 'Tain't ice—'tain't water—hit's sleet! I reckon you're chillin' and begrudging!"

"I'm not, Miss Lauson. Oh, I like it. A storm in the woods—why, it's—it's just exhilarating!" he cried.

"And you love the wind and rain!" She spoke as if to herself. "How come you come to me, stranger? Who told you I loved the storm, too?"

Again his tongue nearly slipped in self-betrayal. If she would risk so much against a scoundrel who had welched on \$900 of a legal fee, what wouldn't she do

against a man who had lost her fortune in pearls? She watched his expression as he looked around—the fine misty drive of wind and sleet gathering in drops wherever it fell; it struck her pink cheeks, it clung in tiny sparkles on her curly bobbed hair, and stuck to the nap of her gray felt hat.

A black shadow—a figure like a storm shade in the gloom—flashed along the trail ahead, darting sideways out of sight.

"Somebody!" he exclaimed, and thrust her aside out of the wagon road behind a laurel bush.

"Somebody?" she whispered. "It'd be Bald Knob, likely. Maybe hit's somebody we don't cyar about."

"I'll go find out," he said, starting, but she caught his arm.

"He won't shoot me," she said. "I'll go meet him. If I drop my hat it's Bald Knob Stubbors. I'll just go 'long, slow. But he'll be watching, yes indeedy! If'n he saw you, he'll shoot—shoot—shoot——"

"Go on," he urged. "He couldn't see me plain, if he saw me at all."

She saw the good sense of this and went on again, slowly. Burton dropped down the side hill slope behind the laurels, took advantage of the windfall trees along the mountain and circled wide on the north side. Whoever he had seen had darted to the south of the trail, and whatever he did, he would not cross back again in sight of the young woman who sauntered along slowly with her carbine in the crook of her elbow, glancing around in the way of a stillhunter, blasts of wind sweeping over the mountain crest which narrowed and rose again beyond the low saddle, blowing the flap of her hat down against her ear and cheek.

"Hi-i!" a voice abruptly yelped in the wind, and Burton heard the hail. He ventured to peer through a screen of shrubs and there was a tall handsome man wearing two wide cartridge belts with two holsters for a revolver and an automatic on the left side. He was carrying a bolt-action army model Springfield in the crook of his left arm.

The young woman took off her hat and whipped it as if to get rid of the sleet-drops on it, accidentally dropping it. She stopped short, facing the outlaw, who was grinning, gazing at her, his long, narrow lips whipping about as he talked, whatever he was saying.

Seeing Theda Lauson he forgot his caution, neglected to be on guard. When he had inched nearer and nearer to her, and she did not give ground, he turned and looked back along the hog-back road over which he had come from the west on his way to the fiddler's open cabin. Then suddenly he reached and caught his arm around her, dropping his rifle and snatching her carbine away.

"I'm a kissin' yo', Missy!" he cried out, laughing boisterously. "Now keep yo' haid thataway, Theda Lauson! I tol' yo' I'd make yo' pay, instead of me!"

A voice, clear and sharp, pierced the roaring of the wind and swashing of the



sleet. The lithe young woman whirled out of his arm and he flung himself clear and on the instant Burton shouted:

"Hold on, you damned pearl thief!" and the scoundrel froze at that summons from behind him, stood for an instant with his arms bent and his hands drawn into hooked claws. Burton would have recognized that left hand among hundreds—long, slim, brown, the fingers big, spatulate, on the tips.

Bald Knob Pete turned and his dead-brown eyes bulged, showing the whites all around—a mean killer's eyes. Bent at the hips and knees, ready to leap, he turned to face the interrupter. He narrowed his lids as he conquered his panic surprise, his shoulders drawing down, his right foot slipping back in the wet clay hardpan.

"Look out!" the young woman exclaimed, but the desperate man had taken his chance against that man he knew to be chiefly a city fellow who he hoped did not know the technique of getting and keeping the drop on a man.

But it was a high-speed shell in the chamber of the stranger's rifle that stopped his charge. Bald Knob was sure bad! His brags of never being tried for murder again were made good! He couldn't hope to keep up against those terrible, trifling little slugs. The desperado turned and darted over the brink and down the mountain slope, bounding in frantic leaps of five, ten perpendicular feet. They saw him leap over a log and drop out of sight. They heard him fall, heard him crashing, and watched the switch-hickories thrashing and jerking as he charged down through them. Then they heard him thud into something and after a little crash, the sound of the roaring wind grew again upon their ears.

THE young woman stood with her hands pressed against her throat. Her incubus, her terrible dread was gone. She was safe! She had not realized the weight of that burden on her every thought and act until it was removed—forever. She nearly fell when she picked up her rifle. Burton caught and held her, while she gave way to feminine sobs, and clung to him, trembling and relieved.

"Oh, stranger, yo' he'ped me!" she cried. "I c'n neveh pay yo' back, suh, gettin' shut of that scoundrel!"

"You can forgive me!" he exclaimed impulsively.

"Forgive yo'?" she repeated, inquiringly, puzzled.

"I'll go down to him," he said. "Sit in the lee of that big hollow tree till I come back."

He scrambled down the steep slope and found Bald Knob Pete at the foot of a tree trunk against which he had bumped in his last blind and instinctive rush. Burton

ransacked his clothes and in his cartridge and money belt he found the pearls, the envelopes stained but the gems intact, glowing in the clouded daylight.

He hurried up to the hogback crest and sat down beside the young woman.

"Theh's a thousand dollars reward on him," she reminded him. "I reckon hit's yours, suh."

"No," he shook his head, "\$900 would pay your father's fee."

"You wouldn't do that, would you, Stranger?" she asked. "That'd leave only \$100 for you, suh. That's a terrible lot of money."

"Not so much." He shook his head, and emptied into the lap of her skirt, one by one, those thirty-odd pearls. "But these are right much! They were in Bald Knob's belt, Theda. And," he felt in his watch pocket, "here is one more—one he dropped when he grabbed the others."

Open mouthed, she watched them. At first she was puzzled, but when she heard the count, she comprehended.

"Why, how come that scoundrel had those pearls?" she demanded. "I found those pearls in Trammel Creek and sent them to a pearl buyer 'way up north! How come Pete Stubbors had them?"

"He followed the mail to the city office building and stuck up the pearl buyer, stealing them," he answered. "Somebody talked in the post office, probably."

"And yo' said your name is Wright!" she accused him. "That's what yo' said!"

"Yes, Dolan Wright Burton," he squirmed unhappily, "and when I lost your parcel of pearls, worth all those thousands and thousands of dollars, I sure despaired!"

"Thousands of dollars?" she gasped. "My land—I thought perhaps five hundred—perhaps a thousand. And then I thought maybe they were no good!"

"Thirty or forty thousand," he assured her. "I'd written to you—why, here's the letter. He never mailed it."

Theda read the letter, then she nodded.

"How'd that scamp know I had them, that I'd sent them?" she grew stern of features again. "Course the postmaster told him."

"Perhaps he saw you fishing for them, finding them?" he suggested.

"I reckon, yas, suh, I expaict!" she frowned. "I remember, now. I heard a day-time owl hooting. If I'd known—but he's daid, now. Well, he's daid enough."

"Would you trust me to try and sell those pearls again?" he asked.

"Take them!" She thrust the whole packetful at him.

"And—and then I'll come back," he went on determinedly. "And we'll go honeymooning on the ten per cent commission I'll charge you."

"Yes, suh," she assented. "I reckon, Mr. Wright, Mars' Burton!"



*Abby Glidden's Infatuation for Jim Delaney Could Bring
Her No Happiness, But It Did Save His Life*



RUN OF THE BRUSH

Conclusion



By

WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

Author of "The Valiant,"

"The Fighting Tenderfoot,"

and Other Outstanding Western Novels

CHAPTER XXX

BUSTER EATON DELIVERS A LETTER

JIM followed Abby Glidden out of the store. As he watched her moving across the street, he thought he had never seen a woman to whom anger was more becoming. The passion in her seemed to set fire to the long supple grace of her body. He could imagine that

Queen Elizabeth in her brittle youth might have carried herself with the imperious rage of this girl. Queenly was the word Jim had in mind. She walked as though she spurned the common earth.

At the hitch rack she stopped, then turned abruptly. Jim was in front of the store. Out of the Palace, Colonel Corcoran and Buck Burris were just coming.

The young woman spoke to Corcoran,

her voice trembling, a long arm outflung toward Delaney. "This man—this killer—said my cousin has gone. His horse is here with mine, Brad's horse. He can't have gone. Don't lie to me. Did that murderer kill Brad? Is that what he means?"

Corcoran took off his hat. "No, Miss Glidden. Slim told you the truth. Your cousin fired at him without warning and lit out before we could settle with him. I reckon he took the first horse handy."

"Three of you to one," she cried scornfully. "That's how you Corcorans fight."

She freed one of the horses at the hitch rack. The bay gelding with the side saddle she held by the reins, her furious eyes searching for a mounting block. "Steady, Black Hawk," she ordered.

Jim stepped across the street. "Let me help you, Miss Glidden," he said.

Abby hated his young debonair grace and his mocking smile. Her dark eyes flamed anger. The quirt in her hand swept up—and down across the young man's devious face.

He tore the whip from her and flung it away, bleak gaze fixed on her.

"If you're ready, Miss Hellcat," he drawled, at last.

Surprisingly, as their eyes locked in battle, the fury of hers died away. The blow that had brought the crimson streak to his cheek had exhausted the explosive force in her. An inner emotion had swept her, one wholly unexpected, wholly new. It paralyzed her will, left her strangely shaken. She drew back, as if in fear of him, the color dying from her face. Her breasts rose and fell faster than usual, as with one who has been running.

He had offered to help her, and the quirt in her strong hand had lashed his face. Some stubborn instinct in him held Jim to his ironic tender of service. He would not let her angry scorn defeat him.

"Always trampled on men, haven't you?" he said, almost in a murmur. "What you need is a boss, someone to beat hell out of you."

"You brute," she told him, but without

the usual lusty conviction of her epithets.

"Give me yore foot," he said curtly.

TO HER surprise she lifted it obediently and put it in his hand. He gave the lift and she found herself in the saddle. Automatically she arranged her skirts, then looked down at him, an odd shyness in her big dark eyes. She opened her lips to speak and closed them without saying anything. From her throat there came instead a strangled sob. She gave her gelding the spur and lifted it to a gallop.

Jim dabbed his bleeding face with a bandanna. "Nice gentle little catamount," he said to his friends, with a laugh.

Corcoran shrugged. "She's one of the wild Gliddens, but I wouldn't say you weren't to blame some, Slim. She knew you were mocking her, and she cut loose the only way she could. What beats me is why she let you help her up finally."

"Must be his winning ways," Buck jeered amiably.

Jim made no comment, but he too wondered exactly what the meaning was of that wordless drama which had leaped to life between them. One moment she had been all furious scorn; the next a girl troubled by misgivings. During that long meeting of the eyes, drums of excitement had beat in her heart and the sound of them had echoed in his.

He put that speculation from him, to set his mind on a more practical problem. Rose had written and asked him to come to her at once and take her to the ranch. She had suggested that she was in danger, or at least was afraid, and she had asked him not to tell her father. Since she did not want to worry him, it would be soon enough for him to know when she reached the Cross Bar B.

Jim would have to go to San Antonio. He realized that, yet there was something about this he did not like. It was for Pike Corcoran to decide whether he wanted his daughter brought to the ranch during these troublous days. Delaney was drawing his pay as an employee. There seemed to him

a species of disloyalty in moving without his authority, something almost underhanded.

Reluctantly he asked the colonel for leave of absence.

"Got to go to Santone for a couple of days if you can let me off," he explained.

Corcoran smiled. "He gets a letter from his girl, Buck. And right away he wants to get off. But he hasn't got any girl, he claims. What do you make of that, Buck?"

"You tell me, Colonel," Buck drawled. "Claims he's got no use for girls. Claims they are poison to him."

"Go ahead, Buck," Jim interrupted. "You sound like you're wound up like an eight day clock. Have yoreself a good time."

In spite of his apparent insouciance Jim was uneasy. The random guess of the colonel had hit too near the mark. Rose was not his girl of course. He was just a waddy hired by her father and she was the daughter of one of the richest men in Texas. But when he arrived at the ranch with her it would be hard to explain to Corcoran that he was only a good Samaritan. The chances were that the boss would give him his time and tell him he could go down the road.

Jim rode with the others to the ranch to get a fresh horse. He was still mulling the thing over in his mind. It seemed to him strange that Rose had not appealed to her cousin Jack Corcoran. He was on the ground, could help her more promptly, and was in the family. If it had been Polly Stuart now, with her flair for dramatics! But Rose, shy and a little proper and quite unsure of herself—it did not seem in character.

JIM saddled a fresh horse and went into the house to eat dinner. After he had finished he walked out to the porch and untied his mount.

"Look out for yourself, Slim," the colonel told him anxiously. "Don't forget you have enemies in Santone. I hate like Sam Hill to see you go."

A man on horseback came down the road at a jog trot. At sight of Jim he threw up a hand of greeting.

"'Lo, you old son of a gun, I been lookin' for you all over West Texas. Got a message for you. Where you been keepin' yoreself at?"

"'Lo, Buster," Jim called back. "Someone was tellin' me you got hanged or shot or drowned, or something. I see the guy was premature a li'l bit. What you mean message? Who from?"

Buster rode up and swung from the saddle. "Say, am I in time for grub? I ain't seen food since last time."

Colonel Corcoran had stepped to the porch. Jim introduced the cowhand to him. "Colonel, this is Buster Eaton. Buster, meet Colonel Corcoran. Who is the message from?"

"From a lady."

Buck Burris had followed the others outside. "Another one or the same girl, I wonder," he murmured aloud.

The colonel laughed. Jim turned a brick red.

From Eaton he took the letter handed him. It was on the same kind of stationery as the other letter in his pocket. He tore open the envelope, looked at the signature, and frowned.

"I don't know any Lucy Page," he said.

Buster coughed, a trifle embarrassed. He glanced at Corcoran. "She's a—a friend of mine. A dance girl at The Green Curtain."

Jim's eyes raced back and forth over the written lines. He read the letter twice. The second time he was making up his mind on a certain point.

"Like to see you, Colonel," he said.

Corcoran led the way to the little room that served him as an office. "What's on your mind, Slim?" He added, with a smile, "Breach of promise or divorce?"

Jim did not know how to begin. He had to be careful to say nothing that would lead up to the adventure he had had with Rose in The Green Curtain.

"I've had a letter, Colonel," he blurted

out, and then stopped, an embarrassed young man.

"Two of them, Slim," corrected the owner of the Cross Bar B.

"That's right. I don't want you to get me wrong, Colonel. Fact is, the first letter is signed by Miss Rose."

Corcoran stiffened. "By my daughter?"

"Yes, sir. It didn't look just right to me. She would get Jack to help her, or she would write you."

"Help her. What do you mean? Give me that letter, Slim."

Jim handed over to his employer the first letter he had received. Corcoran read it, frowning.

"I reckon it's a forgery," Jim explained.

"Why would my daughter ask you to bring her here? Why wouldn't she write



to me?" The colonel fixed harsh steady eyes on Delaney. "Is there something going on between you and her I don't know about? If so, what?"

"No, sir. I was surprised to get the letter and I didn't know what to do."

"You ought to have known what to do—turn it right over to me. I'm surprised at you, Slim."

"Couldn't throw a young lady down, could I? Anyhow, that's not the point. I think it's a fake. Would you say that was her writing, Colonel?"

CORCORAN could not immediately disengage his mind from resentment. "Not your business to wait on her. If there are any orders in my family I'll give them. I'm the one to say where she is to stay."

"Yes, sir," Jim agreed. "It was dumb of me to think Miss Rose could have written that letter."

The colonel examined the handwriting. "Looks like her fist," he said, and added suspiciously: "What makes you so sure it isn't?"

"Like you say, she would not have written to me but to you. Besides, I got another letter."

"Not from Rose?" the older man snapped irritably.

"No." Jim opened the second letter. "She signs it Lucy Page. Says she works at The Green Curtain and Meldrum got her to write the first letter. Says she didn't get on to what was doing until she had turned it over to Meldrum, then she figured out it was a trap to get me to Santone where they could kill me. So she is getting Buster to bring this warning to me. Begs me for God's sake not to pay any attention to the first letter and not to tell anybody she has written me. Here's the letter."

Pike read it. "Same person wrote both, I judge," he said, comparing the two. "The capital D is alike in both, and notice how the E is made."

"No doubt about it. Look at this M and this one." Jim pointed them out, standing beside the colonel.

"You don't know this Page girl, Slim. That's what you said, didn't you? Why is she taking so much trouble to protect you?"

"Don't know. Buster might tell us something about her."

"Might." Corcoran stepped outside and called Eaton into the room. He flung an abrupt question at the cowboy. "Young man, how well do you know this Page woman?"

Buster flew flags of embarrassment. "Why, Colonel—I—I—"

The owner of the Cross Bar B brushed aside the young man's stammering explanations.

"I don't care anything about your per-

sonal life. What I want to know is how reliable this girl is. What is she like?"

"She's right reliable, Colonel. As nice a girl as you'd ever meet in a dance hall. Good hearted and—and square."

"You know what was in that letter you brought Slim?"

"I didn't read it, but I know what was in her mind. She was plumb worried. I had to promise I'd get her letter into Slim's hands soon as I could."

"If she works for Meldrum why is she so anxious to save Slim?"

"She doesn't like Dave. None of his girls do. When she figured out he had used her to help trap Slim she felt awful bad. If you knew Lucy like I do you'd understand. She's a good girl. Maybe that sounds funny to you, but it's so. She'll do to ride the river with, Lucy will."

"Unless she has you fooled," Corcoran said.

"She hasn't got me fooled," Buster denied stoutly. "She's all right."

Though Pike Corcoran was now a wealthy citizen full of responsibilities, and also a member of the church in good standing, there had been a time not so many years before when he had been a wild young buckaroo. Experience had taught him that character and respectability are not synonymous. A woman from a dance hall might have in her reservoirs of goodness and decency, and one riding in her carriage might be empty of everything but selfishness and vanity.

"Why did she write the other letter?" he asked.

"Dave told her it was a joke, that they were loadin' a young squirt who needed taking down," Eaton explained. "Afterward, when she thought it over, that didn't look good to her. She worked it out that Dave was fixing to rub Slim here out."

"One thing is sure," Jim said. "The same person wrote both letters."

"Lucy finished writing the one I brought while I was in the room," Eaton said.

"Since that is so, there wouldn't be any

sense to it unless it means just what it says," Jim pointed out.

EATON was only a brush popper and Pike Corcoran was one of the big men of the state, but Buster resented this suspicion and said so.

"I've ridden a heap of miles to bring you a message from a girl who risked a lot to send it. If this letter had fallen into the wrong hands she would have been in trouble up to her neck. I'll tell you one thing, Slim. Sure as God made little apples Lucy sent me to save yore life. Far as I'm concerned, you can do as you damn please, except for one thing. You'll padlock yore tongues about having been warned by her."

Jim grinned his friendly smile at Eaton. "We'll sure do that, Buster. I'm satisfied it's the way you say, and when I get a chance I'll sure thank the lady for what she did. Don't get on yore ear, son. We've got to check up on any funny stuff Meldrum pulls off. We're where we daren't make any mistakes. This is war."

"That's all right with me," Eaton said. "All I'm saying is you can bank on Lucy all the way—just as far as you can on me."

"I'm satisfied too," Corcoran said, patting Eaton's shoulder. "We're obliged to you, boy, and to your lady friend. Tell her if I can ever do anything for her she can count on me." He drummed with his finger tips on the table. "But there's one thing worries me some. Meldrum would go a long way to do me a meanness. This first letter is a threat against my daughter. Of course he wouldn't dare do her any harm, but he might annoy her."

Pike stopped, his jaw square and set. He was remembering that this villain had taken one of his daughters and ruined her life. Was there any possible way he could touch the other?

"Dave hates you like poison, but he couldn't do a thing against Miss Rose, unless he has gone plumb crazy. This country wouldn't stand for it a minute." Buster

spoke with blunt finality. Texans held women high.

True enough, Jim admitted to himself. But Meldrum must have sent the letter because he suspected Jim was in love with Rose. Since this was so, since Meldrum and the Gliddens felt they could strike at both their enemies through Rose, was it so impossible they might try to use her as bait to trap them, even though they had failed this time. It was ridiculous to suppose she was in actual danger, yet they might frighten her. Would it not be better to get her out of San Antonio to a place out of their reach?

After Eaton had gone he suggested as much to her father.

Pike was of that opinion himself. But he did not want to bring her to the Cross Bar B, where at any time there might be serious trouble. "I'll have Jack take her down to Tom Stuart's ranch near Laredo," he decided. "He will look after her till this flare up has settled down."

So it was settled.

CHAPTER XXXI

JACK CORCORAN GETS OUT OF A BUGGY

FROM the wheels of the buggy rose a cloud of yellow dust. On both sides of the road mesquite stretched to the edge of the horizon. In places branches brushed against the side of the rig.

Rose grumbled a little to her cousin. She did not want to be shipped away where news would reach her only after a long delay.

"I don't see why I couldn't go to the Cross Bar B," she complained. "It's nice of Uncle Tom to ask me down there, but I'd rather be at home."

Jack Corcoran flicked the buggy whip close to the left ear of the right horse. "Uncle Pike figured you would be safer at the Stuart ranch," he said.

"Safer? Good gracious! Wasn't I safe enough at school? Who would bother me? I'm just a girl."

"You're Pike Corcoran's daughter," Jack

mentioned. "Already Dave Meldrum has tried to use you to trap Slim. No knowing what he would do next. Course they wouldn't hurt you. We know that. But they might use you somehow to get an advantage. Anyhow Uncle Pike didn't want you near Dave."

"How do you mean he used me to trap Slim?" she asked.

Jack told her about the letter. Down the back of the girl a chill traveled.

"I worry all the time," she explained in a low voice. "I keep getting afraid they will hurt Father—or someone—and do something terrible. Last night I woke up and couldn't sleep. I had dreamed the Gliddens had captured Jim Delaney and meant to torture him. It's horrible. Why don't the rangers stop it?"

"Maybe they will soon," Jack said. "Lieutenant Brisbane told me yesterday they are waiting for something to break. He knows the Gliddens are rustlers and a bad outfit generally, but he hasn't got enough on them yet. They haven't had any luck lately. Though they started the fight-



ing, they have always got the worst of it so far. The rangers can't very well arrest them for getting their own men killed."

"First thing you know these men will kill Father—or Jim—or some of our friends," Rose said, a worried frown on her young face. "Isn't there any law? Do we have to wait until—until—"

Her sentence tailed out despairingly.

By way of comfort Jack assured her that both her father and Jim Delaney were pretty well able to look after themselves.

Out of the brush three men rode. They surrounded the buggy. Jack looked from

their drawn revolvers into the masked faces with a heart that seemed to have been plunged into a lake of icy water.

"Get out of that buggy," one of the men ordered.

Jack hesitated, and played for time. "What do you want?" he asked. "I haven't got but about ten dollars with me."

He knew they did not want his money. Subconsciously he was telling himself that it would do no good to reach for a weapon. They would drill him through before his hand could travel six inches from the rein.

"Reach for the sky—and get out pronto," the spokesman commanded.

"No use us getting out," Jack argued. "I take it you are road agents, gentlemen. I'll give you every cent we have and you can let us go on."

The blue barrel of a .45 was pushed nearer to Jack's head.

"Did you hear me? Get out, or I'll let you have it and feed yore carcass to the buzzards."

Rose spoke, in a small frightened voice. "Please get out, Jack. Maybe if I explain to these—these gentlemen—"

A strong arm reached in and plucked her from the buggy seat. She was lifted to the saddle in front of the rider. Another of the men disarmed young Corcoran.

JACK said, quietly, driving down the panic in his breast, "You're piling up trouble for yourselves if you interfere with this young lady. Leave her out of it and do business with me."

One of the men ripped out a sudden furious oath. "I've a mind to do business with you, fellow. You're a Corcoran. That's enough for me." The barrel of his revolver jerked toward Jack.

"Don't be a fool, Cole," another man cried urgently. "He's not in this."

Jack noticed that all three of the men were lanky rawboned fellows, the last speaker thinner and gaunter than the others. That would be Lute Glidden.

"The whole tribe is in it," snarled the

one called Cole. "What's the idea of us sittin' back and lettin' them kill our boys while we do nothing about it?"

"Let me down," cried Rose, struggling to free herself.

The horse carrying the double load danced nervously. Jack caught sight of a Circle G branded on the left shoulder. The longlegged rider steadied his mount.

"Be still, you little fool," he snapped at Rose.

To Jack, crisply, Luther gave an order. "Last call. Get out."

Young Corcoran got out, as if he had been released from a spring. From the step of the buggy he dived at the gaunt Glidden's throat. One arm went round the neck, the other closed on the protuberant Adam's apple. Both men went down into the dusty road, Luther head first. They struggled, Jack trying to get the gun. In the mixup Luther Glidden's mask came off.

Jagged lightning flamed before Jack's eyes. He sank into unconsciousness.

"That'll hold him," Cole said with savage satisfaction. He had wiped Corcoran with the long barrel of his .45 and he felt better.

"We'll light out before he comes to," Luther said.

They rode into the brush.

"Where are you taking me?" Rose wailed, in terror.

"Don't be scared," Luther told her. "We won't hurt you any. You'll be back with your friends inside of forty-eight hours."

He led the way, winding to and fro in the mesquite.

CHAPTER XXXII

COLONEL CORCORAN GIVES ORDERS

ONE of Corcoran's line riders dropped in to the ranch-house and reported to the boss. When he had finished telling about the fences and the stock he added, almost casually, a bit of information.

"Funny thing, Colonel. I was camped on Hog Creek last night. The hound woke me with his barking. Three men and a

woman were riding along the hillside about fifty yards from me."

"What time of night?"

"I'd guess around eleven o'clock."

"Sure it was a woman?"

"Yes, sir. The light wasn't any too good, and I wouldn't know any of them. But one sure was a woman."

"Did they stop and talk?"

"No, sir. Rode straight on, like they were ghosts. When I hollered they didn't answer."

"Queer," admitted Corcoran. "Where would a woman be going with three men at that time of night?"

"Search me."

Pike said, with a smile: "Sure you weren't dreaming?"

"Dead certain," the waddy said positively.

"Which way were they headed?"

"Northwest."

"Oh well! None of our business. I reckon even outlaws have wives. If you are going to comb the brakes below Hog Creek for those strays better get Homer and Shorty to go with you."

Two hours later Jack Corcoran rode in on a horse covered with lather. His face was drawn and his eyes haggard with anxiety. He flung himself from the saddle and ran into the house calling for his uncle.

Pike was down at the corral with Delaney examining a lame horse. At sight of his nephew's face he straightened abruptly.

"Rose. They've got her," the young man blurted.

"Who?" asked her father, alarm in his rasping voice.

"The Gliddens. They held us up a little way out of town and took her with them."

"And you let them take her?"

"They knocked me cold. When I came to they had gone."

Pike Corcoran looked like a man with a mortal fear in his heart. He put a hand against the flank of the horse to steady himself.

Jim Delaney carried on with the questions. "How many of them?"

"Three. One was Cole Glidden. Another was Lute, I reckon."

"How do you know?"

Jack told his story.

The colonel broke in with a little cry. "Yorkey saw them last night. On Hog Creek. They passed close to his camp."

Delaney crushed down the dread in his heart. He spoke with a crisp confidence he did not feel. "They won't hurt her. They know better. This time they have passed the border line. We'll rouse the country and hunt them down. They'll be stomped out like rattlesnakes."

"They were going northwest," Pike said.

"Heading for the home ranch. Get busy, boys. We'll tear them from their hole. Get horses—guns. Call in our riders."

The Cross Bar B woke to furious energy. Men caught, saddled, rode away to call in those who were out on duty with the stock or riding the line. One went to Eagle Pass to notify the sheriff, another to Uvalde with a letter from Jim Delaney to King Cooper. A third carried the news to a body of rangers camped on Wolf Creek. Within a few hours the whole countryside would be seething. A sheepherder reported that he had seen four riders at daybreak. They had been riding through the brush at a distance. He could not tell whether one of them was a woman.

JIM was of opinion that they would draw a blank at the Circle G. The Gliddens had made a bad mistake, one that might very well break them, but Sim was not fool enough to have taken their prisoner to the ranch. He would put up the bluff that this abduction was none of his doing or of any of his friends.

Beside the colonel rode his nephew Jack and Jim Delaney. A man cantered down a draw waving a bandanna.

"What is it, Nelson?" shouted Pike as soon as the man was within hailing distance.

Word had reached Nelson of what had

taken place and he came with news. He was a nester on Big Creek. Four riders had crossed the valley below his house not three hours ago. He was sure one of them was a woman.

Jim was surprised, and told his companions so. There was something queer about this affair. Three times the kidnappers had let themselves be seen since they had taken Rose. In a country such as this, with vast stretches of uninhabited brush, they ought to have been able to reach their destination unseen.

"The answer is they didn't," Pike said impatiently. He was not interested in theories. The one thing that obsessed his thoughts was the need to get Rose back safely.

Yet Jim persisted. "I'm wondering if there isn't a better answer," he replied. "These Glidden boys know this country. They didn't have to come within miles of Nelson's place. Why did they risk being seen—unless their idea was that they wanted someone to see them?"

"Why would they want anyone to see them?" the colonel asked, the rasp of anxiety in his voice.

"That's what I'd like to know," Jim said. "What's in their minds? They're trying

ing their tracks either. Do they want us to catch them? That doesn't make sense."

Jim could not work out the problem, but his mind continued to dwell on it.

By the time Corcoran's forces were ready to close in on the Circle G the posse had swelled to more than thirty men. Sheriff Moore had cut across from Eagle Pass to join them.

If the Gliddens were not completely surprised by the avalanche of riders who swept down upon them, they gave a very good imitation of it. Sim, Mart, and Bill were sitting on the porch smoking. They vanished into the house and closed the door.

PIKE flung himself from his horse and ran up the porch steps. He hammered on the door. "Come out of there, you rats, and bring my daughter with you," he shouted.

Sim had caught sight of the sheriff. "What's all this about, Moore?" he called from inside.

"You know what it's about, you dirty wolf," roared Pike. "Come out of there, or we'll shoot you down like coyotes."

Sheriff Moore stepped forward. "First off, we want Miss Rose Corcoran, Sim," he said.

"What in Mexico you talking about?" Sim asked.

"We know she's here, and we mean to get her," Corcoran broke in angrily.

Sim flung open the door. "What crazy idea is this? She's not here. I don't know where she is. Far as I know I never set eyes on her. Is she lost?"

His brothers stood back of him. Both of them held revolvers in their hands. Sim apparently was unarmed.

"You'll tell me where she is, or I'll hang the whole caboodle of you," Corcoran threatened.

Jim was standing just back of his chief. He watched the three Gliddens, one after another. He was convinced they knew nothing about the disappearance of Rose. That looked reasonable to him. Hot-



to fool us somehow. One thing is sure. They won't hurt Miss Rose. They daren't, and they wouldn't anyhow. Why did they take her? For a ransom? I wouldn't think so. They are not that crazy. Why then?"

"Does it matter why, since we know they did?" Jack asked.

"Sure it matters. They are not cover-

headed youth had been responsible for this crazy attempt at reprisal.

"You talk like a fool, Pike," Sim said. "Do you reckon we've gone plumb crazy just because you have? Even though your killers have been shooting down our friends, we Gliddens don't fight women. If the young lady has got herself lost we'll help hunt for her."

Sim's voice was suave and conciliatory. He was talking really to the sheriff and the non-partisans, trying to make out a case for the Gliddens as injured parties. None the less Jim thought he read in the man's heavy face a bewildered doubt. Young Delaney's guess was a shrewd one. This was the first that Sim had heard of the disappearance of Rose, but a wave of dread was drenching him. He remembered the conference in Meldrum's office at The Green Curtain. Cole had been very keen to trap Slim. It was possible that when the first plot failed he might have done this fool thing. Sim knew his son well enough to be sure that he would not under any consideration injure Rose Corcoran. But if he had mixed himself up in an abduction, Texas would not ask what his intentions were. It would move to swift vengeance.

"Step out of there and give up those guns," Pike said harshly. "I'm searching the house, and I don't care whether I do it with you dead or alive."

The sheriff said hastily, to prevent bloodshed: "Don't push on the reins, Pike. I'm in charge here. We'll search the place, but there isn't going to be any shooting. You-all had better surrender to me, Sim. I'll see you get protection."

"All right," Sim said quietly. "I'm not armed. Boys, give your guns to the sheriff. You can search the house and the whole ranch. The young lady isn't here and never has been. I don't know why you come to the Circle G looking for her."

"I'll tell you why, you damned wolf," Corcoran answered. "Because you're in this outrage up to your neck. You set your worthless sons on to kidnap my daugh-

ter, and now you're in trouble you stand there bleating innocence like a sheep. You've gone too far this time."

THE stony heavy-lidded eyes of Sim were expressionless. He asked a question. "Who says my boys kidnapped your daughter?"

Jack Corcoran answered him. "I say so. Your sons Cole and Lute and one other man. They were masked and held us up on the Laredo road."

"If they were masked how do you know who they were?" Sim snapped.

"I had a rough and tumble with Lute and his mask came off. Before this one of them called Cole by his name."

"Don't believe a word of it," Sim replied. "It's a trick. First off, I don't think the young lady is lost. If she is, my boys hadn't a thing to do with it. Since your men began murdering us, Corcoran, you've got so you won't stick at anything."

Bill spoke up, savagely. "You've got that killer Delaney with you now. That's a dead giveaway."

"We've nothing to hide," Sim told the sheriff. "We'll surrender to you if you'll give us fair play."

"You'll get it," Moore said.

He collected the guns from Bill and Mart Glidden.

The house was searched and no sign of Rose discovered.

Colonel Corcoran returned to the three brothers. His heart was filled with fear, his frozen face grim as the day of judgment.

"We'll comb this place. I don't expect to find her here. If we don't, you're going back to the ranch with me as my prisoner, Sim, and if any harm has come to her I'll shoot you down like a coyote."

"I object to that," Sim cried, appealing to the sheriff. "I'm your prisoner, not his. It's a trap to rub me out, that's what it is. I'll not stand for it."

"You'll go back with me alive, or you'll stay here dead," Corcoran said, and stressed his words with an oath.

"You going to let him murder me, Moore?" Sim asked.

"No, nothing like that," the sheriff said stoutly.

But he was troubled. Corcoran's men outnumbered his three to one. He knew the colonel would not let Sim Glidden out of his hands until Rose was found. The best he could get was a compromise.

"We want this thing cleared up," Moore went on. "I don't think Sim or his brothers had a thing to do with this. But we'll hold them prisoners until we know where we're at. I'll go along with them back to your ranch, Pike. They're my prisoners. Understand that."

Jim asked the Gliddens where the young men were. "I reckon they're all away at a camp meeting somewhere getting religion," he added.

"That's right, Sim," Moore said. "Where are the boys? This would be a fine time to give them an alibi if you can."

"How do I know where they are?" Sim replied, with irritation born of anxiety. "I don't ride herd on them. They might be at Eagle Pass, Uvalde, or anywhere else. You know how young fellows hell around, Moore."

Delaney drew Jack Corcoran and Buck Burris aside.

"Sim doesn't know any more about this than we do, looks to me," he said. "They pulled this off without consulting him, I'd say. If that's the case, they won't bring Miss Rose here."

Buck nodded. "My idea too. I'm guessing Lost Park."

"Reasonable," agreed Jim. "They would have a safe line of retreat there, for if we came down the ledge road in force they could get away by the north entrance."

"Let's try the park," Jack proposed.

"Just the three of us," Buck said. "We'll travel faster that way."

They consulted with Corcoran. After a moment of consideration the colonel approved. "All right, boys. But be careful. Don't let these wolves get you."

"We won't," Jim promised. He added: "I'm expecting to bring Miss Rose back with us."

"I hope to God you do," her father said fervently.

The three young men rode to Eagle Pass, bought provisions, and took the trail.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A HOSTAGE

EXCITEMENT filled the little town of Eagle Pass. Difficulties were common enough. The place was not unusually wild, but occasionally men passed out to the sound of roaring guns. Texas had not yet emerged from its turbulent early days to a state of law and order. But a good woman was as safe as she would have been in New England. The abduction of Rose Corcoran profoundly stirred the citizens. The storekeeper from whom Delaney and his friends bought supplies expressed the general feeling. "Those Gliddens have done torn it this time sure enough," he said.

Jameson of the Long Trail corral was equipping another posse. It was certain that very shortly the rangers would get into action. No doubt King Cooper would set out with a posse from Uvalde.

The three young men rode out of town knee to knee.

From her doorway a woman called with vehement bitterness, "Get those wolves, Jack, and bring back Rose with you."

"Used to be my cousin's nurse," Jack explained to the others. "The Gliddens are certainly in trouble up to their hocks."

"They made a bad mistake when they left you to carry the news," Buck said. "After Lute's mask came off there was nothing to do but put you out of the way."

"None of them knew I had seen him before," Jack answered. "The idea must of been to play like they were just a bunch of scalawags on the dodge. Probably they had an alibi fixed up to prove it couldn't have been them, don't you reckon?"

"Must have been drinking hard," Buck

guessed. "Otherwise, they would not have been so crazy."

"I don't get it," Jim said, frowning down at his horse's ears. "There's no sense to the doggone thing. What did they take her for? They can't mean to hurt her—nor to hold her for a ransom. There's something else back of it. This business of letting themselves be seen three times. They're not plumb idiots. Must have done that on purpose. Why?"

"You tell us," Jack said. "It's like Buck says, crazy as a hoot owl. If they had been figuring a way to stop the clock of the Glidden outfit in this country they couldn't have picked a better one than this. Say they were drunk and that they didn't expect to be recognized. Even so it was dumb to take a chance when it couldn't get them a thing."

"They must have thought it would buy them something," Jim insisted. "If we only knew what."

They rode hard but carefully, resting their mounts whenever they thought it necessary.

It was after dark, by their camp fire,



that a possible answer to Jim's speculative search for a cause jumped to his mind.

"Could it be a trap they're springing on us, boys?" he asked suddenly.

"What kind of a trap?" Jack wanted to know.

"Say they fixed up a plot to seize Rose and hold her just long enough to stir us up. The plan might be to turn her loose then. Of course she wasn't to know who they were. Maybe they balled that up by getting drunk. Anyhow, they want to toll us along, the way folks do hogs with an

ear of corn, until they have got us where they want us. Then they expect to crack down on us and bump off a few Corcoran men. That would explain why they have been seen two-three times. They want to give us a line on where they are going."

"So half of Texas can follow them," Buck murmured ironically.

"They knew a few of us would get there first, on the jump. They could wipe us out and light out."

"Rose still being with them," Jack commented. "After they had massacred us they would still be up Salt Creek themselves."

JIM nodded. "That's the weak spot of my argument. They still have her with them, and by this time they would have had to turn her loose to play it safe."

"You must have been reading Deadwood Dick stories, Slim," Buck derided. "Still, part of what you say may be right at that. I would hate to wake up and find I was caught in a bear trap. The Gliddens are tricky. They have got something up their sleeves. Well, we'll see what we'll see."

They slept a quarter of a mile from the spot where their camp fire had been. There was a chance someone might have been watching them, and they objected to being shot down while asleep.

As soon as the first faint streaks of light were in the sky they were afoot. Breakfast finished, they took the trail for Lost Park again. Late in the afternoon, they looked down from the rock rim into the valley. Without waiting for night, they rode down the rock trail.

It would not have surprised them if they had been attacked before reaching the bottom. Riding down was a goosey business, since a challenge might boom out at them any moment. They rode well apart, scanning every boulder and shrub as they went.

Unmolested, without having seen a sign of any other human being, they dropped down into the park.

"Looks like we're barking up the wrong tree," Buck said in his gentle drawl. "I'd

hate to travel this far to meet a lady and not find her."

They rode into the live oaks near the foot of the trail and drew up to consult.

"Look," cried Jack Corcoran, and his finger shot out to point at a rider.

A woman was coming up the little ridge toward them at a canter. Apparently she had caught sight of them and had turned aside to investigate.

Over Jim there swept a chill blast, the premonition of disaster. For this woman, tall, and straight, and dark, was not Rose Corcoran but Abby Glidden.

She pulled her horse to a halt in front of them.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded sharply.

"We came to find Miss Corcoran," Buck said.

"Who?"

The amazement in her voice was unmistakable.

"Rose Corcoran," explained Jack curtly. "No use playing innocent. She was brought here by some of your family. We want her."

"Have you gone crazy?" she asked. "Why would they bring her here—or anywhere else?"

"How long have you been in the park?" Jim asked. His voice did not betray the growing conviction in him that they had been trapped to destruction.

"We came in last night, if that is any business of yours," Abby told him haughtily.

"How many of you?"

She answered, angrily. "Four of us."

"You and three men?"

"Yes. What is this fool talk about the Corcoran girl?"

Jim turned to his friends. "Tricked us nice. This is the woman Nelson and the others saw."

"But where is Rose?" Jack asked.

"She is probably home by this time," Jim said. "All they needed her for was as bait to lure us here."

"I don't know what you're talking about," the girl said stormily. "You've got no right to be here. You had better ride out hell for leather. If my brothers find you here you'll be sorry, I can tell you that."

"Some of them are liable to be sorry too," Buck said, stroking his little mustache. "You can tell them that."

CORCORAN swept a hand toward the trail down which they had ridden. "They're not losing any time, boys. Got it blocked already."

Three horsemen could be seen moving toward the foot of the trail.

"Watched us come in and lay doggo," Jim said. "Didn't want to attack us too soon for fear they might drive us back. Now they have us in a bottle with the cork jammed in the neck."

The girl's eyes flashed. "You'll get what's coming to you now for all the killing you've done," she cried.

Delaney needed information. He set out to get it. Indifferently he said, "I reckon we can hold up our end against the four or five men in the park."

"Four or five," she flung back, picking up his words swiftly. "We've got eight—nine—no, ten men here. You'd better throw down your guns and give up."

"You'd guarantee they would treat us well," Jim said ironically.

"As well as you deserve."

"Doesn't sound any too good for us," Buck mentioned. "No telling what we deserve. Who is in charge of your friends, Miss Glidden, if we decide to surrender?"

"I don't know. Brad or Cole, I reckon."

"So you didn't know you were brought along to lead us into a trap," Jim said, studying the girl.

"That's not true," she flared.

"We thought you were Miss Corcoran, and we came here to rescue her. Whoever fixed this up fooled us thorough."

"That's a lie. I wouldn't believe a word you said."

"When you see us laid out cold you'll

be glad to think you had a hand in it," Jim went on evenly.

"Lies—all lies," she cried, eyes hot with anger.

"You'll get a good laugh out of it. I'll bet when you saw us riding down the ledge road you chuckled plenty."

She tried to stare down Delaney's hard gaze and failed. As once before, she felt strange drums of excitement pounding in her blood. A weakness that she hated ran through her.

"I didn't see you coming," she broke out. "I wasn't expecting you. When you say anything different, you're not telling the truth."

JIM smiled grimly. "Then you'll be glad to help us out of the hole we're in." He ranged his horse up beside her mount. "I reckon you'll want to stay with us as a guest for a while till we're sitting high and handsome."

"I'll not stay with you a minute," she cried. "I hate the whole mess of you."

"When you know us better you'll get over that," Jim explained to her.

"I'm not going to know you better—ever," Abby retorted, glaring at him.

She started to swing her horse away, but Jim caught the bridle. "I reckon you don't quite understand," he said. "They used you to get us in here. We'll use you to get out. Fair enough, isn't it?"

"How do you mean—use me?"

"You've heard of a hostage of war, I expect."

The angry color dyed her face. She cut at her horse with the quirt and it began to plunge. Jim clung to the rein. Furi-ously, she lashed at him.

"Get that quirt, Jack," Jim said; and to the horse, "Quit yore crowhoppin'."

Corcoran tore the whip from the young woman and moved up on the opposite side of the animal. Between them the two men quieted the horse.

"Let me go," ordered Abby, her face a map of rage.

"Not yet," Delaney snapped, and his

eyes were hard as jade. "This isn't a courtesy game. You're going to stay with us to save a half a dozen lives."

"Hiding behind a woman's skirt," she flung out scornfully.

"Y'betcha! Just that. And glad to get one to hide behind." Jack Corcoran grinned amiably at her.

"That's the way the Corcorans fight," she charged contemptuously.

Jack's smile asked her to forgive. He had inherited the Southern attitude toward women. They were to be treated with chivalrous gentleness. He wanted her to know that though he was backing the play of Delaney it was only because her kinsmen had forced their hands.

"We won't do you a mite of harm," he promised. "Don't you be scared."

"I'm not afraid, but you are," the girl told him proudly.

"You wouldn't want yore brothers hurt, and long as you stay with us they won't be. We're playing the hand that's been dealt us. It's neck meat or nothing with us, you might say."

Jim laughed, without mirth. "They won't be hurt if they lay off us," he corrected coolly. "But we don't aim to be slaughtered, and if there's any killing done we'll do our share."

Abby turned her hot defiant eyes on his insolent sardonic face. Some spark from him lit churning emotions she could not control—fear, hatred, anger, and a strange passionate excitement. He seemed to her cold and implacable as fate, yet he set fires burning in her blood.

"All the killing so far has been done by you," she cried tempestuously. "My father says you're the worst villain ever came into this country. You shoot down poor Mexicans trying to get back their stolen cattle. You rob and steal—and kill in cold blood. Billy the Kid was no worse than you. Now—when your devil-hatched chickens are coming home to roost—you whine about being trapped by the men you have injured. If my brothers rub you out, it will be a

good thing for this country. Good men will sleep in peace."

"Now you've got that off yore chest we'll be moving," Jim said coldly. "I reckon we'll head for the other end of the park where the brush is thicker."

He turned the heads of his horse and hers. The others followed.

CHAPTER XXXIV

ON THE HORNS OF A DILEMMA

THROUGH San Antonio the rumor that Pike Corcoran's daughter had been abducted ran like a prairie fire driven by the wind. It came to Marie early. She went straight to police headquarters and asked if it was true. The officer in uniform hesitated.

"I'm the sister of Rose Corcoran," she told the sergeant at the desk imperatively.

At once he took her in to see his chief, a full-bodied red-headed man whom he introduced as Wesley Harper.

The chief of police told her all he knew. Jack Corcoran had been taking Rose to the Stuart ranch near Laredo and had been



held up by three men who had forced Rose to ride away with them. The men were masked, but during the struggle one of the masks had fallen off and Jack had recognized the man as a Glidden. The rangers had set out at once in pursuit. The chief thought there was no reason to be unduly alarmed. Even the Gliddens would not dare injure her.

Harper's assurance did not allay Marie's alarm. She went at once to the Travis corral and learned that Jack had set out

for the Cross Bar B to notify her father. The man in charge of the corral gave her Jack's home address.

Marie found Milly Corcoran at home. "I'm Marie," she told her cousin's wife. "I want to know about Rose."

"I've wanted to meet you," Milly said. "Please come in and sit down."

The actress followed Milly into the house but did not sit down. She was anxious, and therefore as restless as a caged panther.

A brown-faced young cowboy who was in the parlor rose to meet her. Milly mentioned his name, Buster Eaton, by way of introduction.

"He is a friend of ours, and he came to tell Jack something he knows," Milly added. "He didn't know Jack had left for the ranch."

Marie lifted her tawny eyes to Buster. "About the kidnapping of Rose?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. In a way." He turned his big dusty hat awkwardly in his hands. "I reckon I better start at the beginning."

He told her of Meldrum's trap to catch Jim Delaney and of how Lucy Page had frustrated the plot.

Swiftly Marie's mind moved. "Dave Meldrum is in this too. I'll see him and make him bring Rose back."

"What about Lucy?" asked Buster. "If Meldrum finds out what she did he'll sure make her pay for it."

Marie took a turn up and down the room, her lithe graceful body more than ever suggestive of a panther's rippling muscles. She thought, furiously.

"Yes, we've got to take care of her—get her out of town where he can't find her. Better bring her here if you can, Mr. Eaton. Tell her it's very important."

Buster nodded. "I'll do that."

"As quickly as you can, please. I'm worried. I want to move fast."

"Y'betcha, ma'am."

Within half an hour Eaton and Lucy Page rolled up in a hack. Buster was beaming, the young woman shy and not at all sure of her reception.

Marie thanked her warmly for what she had done and started to explain why she thought it necessary for her to leave town. She suggested Denver or St. Louis as a destination.

A LITTLE slyly, Lucy smiled. She looked at Eaton. The cowboy flushed beneath the tan. He began to roll his hat in his hands.

"Colorado, ma'am, but not Denver. It's this here way. I'm going up the trail on a drive for Shanghai Pierce to Trinidad. I got an uncle runs stock near there and he's been pesterin' me to go in with him. I'm gonna take him up on that. Lucy starts for Trinidad on the train soon as I can get her to the depot. We fixed it up to get married soon as I reach there."

"The depot?" Milly asked.

"Trinidad." Buster looked at her reproachfully. "You know doggone well I didn't mean the depot."

"How long have you had this idea in your mind?" Milly asked, her eyes bright with interest.

"I've been milling it over considerable for quite a spell," Buster admitted. "But Lucy kinda hung back till she got this jolt today."

"I hope you make a good husband. If you do you'll be happy yourself and make her happy," Milly told him.

"I don't aim to beat up on Lucy much," he laughed happily. "It wouldn't surprise me if I turned out one of these henpecked husbands."

Lucy smiled but said nothing. Her heart sang with joy. The dead days would come to life. She expected their marriage to be a success. If it was not, the fault would not be hers.

After the proper felicitations Marie asked a pertinent question.

"Have you money enough for the journey and to take care of yourself until Mr. Eaton gets to Trinidad?"

"Yes. I'll get a job in some restaurant when I get there," Lucy said.

Half an hour later Milly, Marie and Buster stood on the station platform waving handkerchiefs at a departing train.

Marie lost no time. She sent a message to Meldrum that she wanted to see him at once. The negro boy who had carried the note returned to report that Meldrum had said he was too busy to come.

Ten minutes later the boy was on his way with a second note. It said, bluntly:

If you don't come immediately I shall raise the town against you. I can prove you are back of the kidnapping of Rose. I give you twenty minutes to get here.

Inside of the twenty minutes Meldrum was knocking on the door of the Jack Corcoran house. Milly admitted him.

The gambler bowed to Milly and again with ironical deference to the woman who had been his wife. Eaton he ignored.

"I must have misunderstood you, sweet-heart," he jeered. "Last time we met you mentioned that you never wanted to see me again."

Marie looked steadily at him. "Where is Rose?"

"Alas, I don't keep up with my in-laws as well as I should," he said. "There's a story that she is flying around the country with some wild young bloods. I hope it isn't true."

"You had better know where she is," Marie told him rigidly. "Or I'll see that you are lynched before night."

The mockery left his face as the light does a snuffed candle. "What do you mean? Have you gone crazy?" he asked harshly.

"I mean that you had a letter written about Rose that will hang you to a live oak before dark if you don't bring her back to me."

HE FROWNED, trying to make out what she could possibly mean. Then he remembered, with a heart drenched cold, the letter Lucy had prepared at his dictation. Yet they could not know his part in

it, not unless someone had betrayed him. He tried a bluff.

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"I am talking about the letter you had Lucy Page write to Slim Delaney," Marie said, her eyes never leaving his face.

He shook his head. "I always thought you were daft."

At a nod from Marie, Buster Eaton took the floor.

"No use puttin' on, Mr. Meldrum. Lucy figured it all out and sent a letter by me warning Slim not to come. We've got both letters."

"You can't prove I had a thing to do with it," Meldrum blustered.

"You forget Lucy. I'll have to warn you that Lucy has left The Green Curtain. We have her hidden where we can produce her when we want her."

Meldrum looked him over insolently. "So you're in this plot too, you lunkhead."

Buster knotted his big fists to keep them away from the butt of his gun. He owed this scoundrel something on Lucy's account and he would have liked to pay it.

"I'm in it, all the way," he said, with slurred voice. "Any remarks?"

Meldrum turned his attention back to Marie. "You've taken to blackmail, have you? Well, I won't stand for it a minute. I don't know where your sister is. Probably it's a slick trick Corcoran and that side kick of his Delaney are trying to pull on me. I see you've gone back into the fold. It will make lovely slush, all about the black sheep welcomed home again."

"Never mind about what I've done or am going to do," Marie said quietly. "This is your funeral, unless you do as I say."

"Why is it?" he demanded. "Say I had Lucy write that letter to trap the killer who has become a menace to this country. That doesn't prove I meant to do your sister any harm. I'm not a plumb fool. I've got more sense than that."

Marie's smile had in it neither warmth nor friendliness. "No, it doesn't prove it, but you know as well as I do that the good

people of San Antonio won't ask for complete proof. The letter shows you had it in mind to do her harm—that you were thinking about it."

"Go ahead then," he retorted. "We'll see about that. Maybe you can destroy an innocent man and maybe you can't."

He turned to leave the room.

Marie stopped him with a lift of the hand. "Just a moment. If you go out of that door now you'll be a dead man before night. We'll cry our story all up and down Commerce Street and on the plazas."

The gambler stopped. What she said was quite true. If Lucy betrayed him publicly, that cursed letter would be enough to damn him. No mob bent on lynching, with the lust of blood in their nostrils, would take his word against hers. He had not even threatened the Corcoran girl, but the mind of the man on the street would jump that hurdle easily to a conviction that he had organized this kidnapping. It would not be true, but he would be just as dead as if it were.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked sullenly.

"I want you to guide Mr. Eaton and others chosen by him to the place where Rose has been taken."

"I don't know where she has been taken. I hadn't a thing to do with this. Not a thing. I'm as innocent as you are."

Marie lifted scornful eyebrows. "With your friends the Gliddens in it?"

"You don't know they are in it."

"I do know it. My cousin Jack knocked the mask off one of them."

"That's probably another lie fixed up by him and Pike to ruin me."

"It's no lie, but it will ruin you all right," Eaton said with manifest satisfaction.

"If some of the Gliddens did this fool thing, it doesn't follow that I was in it with them," Meldrum said uneasily. "They don't ask me what to do."

"You've always been hand in glove with them," Marie told him sharply. "If you don't know where she is you can find out."

"How can I find out?" he asked irritably.

"I don't know. I don't care. But you can. I'm not asking you a favor. I'm telling you what to do."

"You're backing me into a corner with a gun," he said, anger and resentment in his voice. "That's what you're doing. Why drag me into this? I've told you a dozen times I don't know anything about it."

"And I've told you that you had better find out—soon." In her eyes was the feminine ferocity one sometimes sees in a wild beast at bay with her young.

"You always were a little devil," he said bitterly.

Meldrum was in a hole, one from which he could find no safe escape. He knew nothing about this kidnapping. He doubted very much if Sim Glidden had planned it. More likely young Cole, his brothers, and his cousins had pulled it off. There was a crazy recklessness about it that suggested

mean a complete break with the Gliddens. They would regard it as a betrayal and no explanations would clear him. Without their support he could hardly carry on in San Antonio, and instead of allies they would be active enemies.

He was on the horns of a dilemma. A choice had to be made. In her passionate attachment to her younger sister Marie would not hesitate a moment to throw him to the lions. That was the more immediate danger. Perhaps he could talk himself out of the other; or perhaps something might occur to avert it.

"I'll do what I can," he said sullenly. "I can't promise to find her because I don't know where she is. But I'll do my best." The gambler turned angrily on Eaton. "Get together your posse, fellow, and don't lose any time. I'll meet you in forty minutes at the Travis Corral."

He swung away abruptly and strode out of the house.

CHAPTER XXXV

COLE GLIDDEN KEEPS A PROMISE

FROM back of a rise a voice came to the riders.

"Hello, Abby!"

Instantly Abby called an answer. "'Lo, Cole!"

The three men closed about her horse. They drew up and waited, rifles in hand. A rider cantered over the brow of the hill and came toward them.

"That's far enough," Buck ordered.

Cole Glidden pulled up his horse abruptly.

"The Corcorans have got me," Abby shouted to him.

"Tit for tat," explained Delaney cheerfully. "We're doing a little kidnapping on our own account."

"You turn my sister loose right now, or——"

Cole did not finish his threat. He could not think of any conclusion dire enough.

"Don't think for a moment," Jim said, raising his voice just enough to carry across



impetuous youth. From the location of the hold-up he could guess where Rose Corcoran had been taken. A rendezvous existed near Horse Crossing where the Gliddens had been wont to cache wet stock. The place was hard to get at and was known to few. The chance was better than a fifty-fifty one that the girl might be found there.

But Dave Meldrum knew that if he led a posse to this cache it would probably

the intervening forty yards. "We're keeping the lady with us till we get out of the park. You brought her here to trick us. Go back and tell yore friends if they want to bring a woman into this two can play at that game."

Cole sat his horse, silent, motionless. The urge was in him to challenge the Corcoran riders to battle instantly. But he was checkmated. He could not lift a hand while they held Abby prisoner in their midst.

"Come out of there, you Delaney," he finally cried. "Don't hide behind a woman, you yellow coyote. Ride to one side and fight it out with me."

"No!" the girl cried swiftly.

Jim paid no attention to her sharp protest. "What would that buy us?" he asked. "I'm not interested in killing you. I had my chance to do that once and didn't take it. We came to the park to get the girl you kidnapped. Where is she?"

"Don't know a thing about that. I'm telling you to let my sister go."

"We'll make a deal," Jim told him. "Take us to the north gateway of the park and soon as we're on that trail we'll turn the lady over to you."

After a moment Cole said, "That's a trade."

He rode cautiously toward them, watching to make sure that none of them made a move to lift their weapons. The five riders started down a draw. Jim and Buck kept pace with Abby, one on each side of her.

"What's this lie they're telling about you boys kidnapping the Corcoran girl?" Abby flung out at her brother.

"Brad heard something about that from a nester over Uvalde way," Cole said glibly. "We figure the Corcorans have hidden her somewhere to put the blame on us. That's the kind of a trick they would do."

Jack Corcoran looked at him, with rising anger. "You wanted to kill me, and yore brother wouldn't let you do it. He called you Cole."

"Sure," young Glidden said with an uneasy laugh. "That's an old trick, using false names in a holdup."

The black eyes of Abby flashed over her brother. She wished she felt more sure the charge was false. "Of course," she cried impatiently. "They would never have used his name if it had been Cole."

"I wrestled with Lute Glidden, dragged him from his horse, and knocked off his mask," Jack said to the girl. "I had seen him once at Eagle Pass, but I don't reckon he had ever noticed me."

"You made a mistake, Cole, in not bumping off the witness," Buck said in his gentle mocking voice. "Not your fault. Blame brother Lute for that. Likely that error will hang all of you."

"Where did you take Rose Corcoran?" Jim snapped at the dark sullen young man who had joined them. "Who is with her now?"

"I didn't take her anywhere," Cole answered sulkily. "You Corcorans fixed up this story to get us in bad. I'll bet she's



right in Santone with her friends this very minute, or else hidden out where you want her to be."

"You wouldn't stop at any trick to do us a meanness," Abby broke out explosively, her dark gaze on Jim.

THE insolent eyes of Delaney met the stormy ones of the girl. "I've a notion, boys, that the young lady isn't in this skullduggery," he drawled. "She's either an innocent bystander, or a doggoned good

actor. I wouldn't be sure which, but I'm giving her the benefit of the doubt."

Abby flung away restraint and poured on him a flood of invective.

Her brother ordered her to shut up. "We can do any cussin' of this scalawag that's necessary without the women of the family bustin' loose," he reproved. "That's no way for a lady to talk, and you know it."

They moved into the brush and worked toward the upper end of the park. Cole guided the party. He led them past the ruins of the burnt cabin where Benson and Ransom had been killed.

"Take a good look at the place," Cole suggested vindictively. "That's where two of you ambushed Bert and Stub—shot them down while they weren't looking."

Buck looked at Jim. "Think I'll tell him how that was, Slim."

"Might as well," Jim agreed. "Not that he'll believe it."

Leaving Abby's name out of the story, Buck told the tale of how the two men in the cabin had shot each other to death.

Harshly, Cole laughed. "You're right, Delaney. I don't believe a word of it."

"Nor I," echoed Abby. "What would they quarrel about?"

Jim turned his ironic smile on her. "I wonder," he said, almost in a murmur.

They came to a rock face built in the shape of a flatiron. Cole swung around it and pushed through a tangle of mesquite. From this a trail ran up a kind of trough filled with rubble.

"There you are," Cole said. "I've done what I promised."

Jim caught in his eye a flicker of triumph and did not understand it. This was the trail. There could be no doubt of that.

"I reckon maybe you'd better speed the parting guests on their way," Jim said deviously. "Ride up with us to the top to make sure one of our horses doesn't fall and bust a leg."

"No, sir. I told you I would show you the trail. You said you would turn my sister loose if I did."

"That's right, Slim," corroborated Jack.

"I'd like to make sure we're on the right trail," Jim said. He turned to the girl. "You wouldn't mind riding a little way further a nice day like this, would you?"

His mockery always infuriated her. "I won't go another foot," she cried.

She whirled her horse and plunged into the mesquite.

"Hold this fellow," Jim cried. "I'll get her."

He dashed into the brush after Abby. She was twenty yards ahead of him when they rounded the rock wall, and she was going like the wind. To him there came the sound of shots.

Jim pulled up abruptly. He had no time to run down her horse even if his mount had the speed. Back on the trail he might be needed. Someone crashed through the mesquite fifty yards to his right. Cole Glidden making his getaway probably.

When Jim caught sight of his friends the day went sudden chill for him. Jack's horse was down, shot through the head. Buck Burris was clutching at his shoulder.

"Hit bad?" Jim asked.

"Might be worse," Buck answered. "That fellow showed us up. He did all the damage before we got a crack at him. I see you didn't get the girl. Just as well."

"We'll look at that wound and fix you up so you can travel," Jim said. "Those fellows will be on our tail soon as word reaches them. Have to take turn about riding double. We sure made a bad job of this. Right at the last I saw that bird had something on his mind."

While Jim was dressing Buck's wound Jack shot his horse to put the animal out of its misery.

"In the shoulder and not into the lung," Jim said to Buck. "That's good. Expect it will hurt like sixty after a while. Wish we didn't have to jolt you over sixty miles of rough country."

Buck shrugged. "I have to take what's been handed to me. It's only a clean flesh wound. The bullet went right through. Don't you worry about me. I can travel all right."

"Travel where?" Jack asked.

He was looking up the trail at the cliffs above them. Two men were standing on a rock gazing down. Jim lifted his eyes to the place where Jack was pointing a finger.

The reason for that gleam of triumph in Cole Glidden's eyes was apparent now. He had led them to the foot of the trail, but he had known all the time that it was blocked.

The spiteful whine of a bullet whistled past their ears.

"We'd better get out of here into the brush," Buck said.

They lost no time in hunting cover. Plunging into the mesquite thicket, they pushed through it into the park.

"Where do we go from here?" Buck asked, grinning ruefully.

"About half a mile below here there's a boulder field close to the wall," Jim said. "There's a spring there, Buck. Don't you remember? Better hole up there, I reckon."

"Good as any place, I dare say," Buck agreed. "We're going to have a whole passle of bees stinging us pretty soon anywhere we go."

That was true enough. Ten minutes ago they had been riding pretty, or so at least they thought. The road out of the park was open for them. Once more they had scored off the Gliddens. Now the situation was completely reversed. They were caught like rats in a trap.

CHAPTER XXXVI

IN THE FIRING ZONE

ALL day the firing of the guns had echoed from the rock wall across the park. The sound of it had shaken Abby's nerves. There was nothing she could do about it. She had begged from Cole and Luther and Brad in turn for these men's lives, and they had waved her petitions aside as of no moment. They had their foes cornered and meant to make an end of them. Young Jeff would like to arrange

some compromise, she felt sure, but he was only a boy and his wish had little weight against the implacability of the others.

Time and again Abby had ridden to the farther end of the park in the hope that the booming of the rifles would not reach her. Distance only increased her anxiety. She found herself listening with strained attention. There would be silence for many minutes, then perhaps a single shot, or half a dozen in quick succession, like the popping of a bunch of firecrackers.

The stillness tortured her. The explosions set her heart fluttering with fear. Each time she wondered if that was the end. Unable longer to bear the uncertainty at last she would gallop back to the spot where three men were fighting for their lives against a dozen.

For more than twenty hours the battle had continued. After the defenders had taken their stand among the big rocks their enemies had formed a half circle around them so as to make escape impossible. Just before dark there had been one wild rush to storm the rocks. The Gliddens had been driven back with two men wounded.

At break of day the sniping had started. Gradually the ring of attackers had worked closer, taking advantage of all the cover that offered. But they had paid for their gains. Brad was wearing his arm in a sling, a red bandanna supporting it. He had stopped a bullet from Jack Corcoran's Winchester just after dawn. His uncle Mart had been shot in the foot and had done a good deal of swearing about it, though he returned to his place in the firing line after Abby had bound up the wound. Whether any of the trapped men had been hit since Cole had struck Burris' shoulder the girl did not know.

But the end was inevitable. In imagination she saw the hour when the victors would move in to look down on the three lifeless bodies, and the thought of it was a knife in her heart. Always she had known the men of her family were hard and ruthless. She was fierce and wild herself. The Glidden lawlessness had brought them to

this, a day of grim vengeance she would never be able to forget.

It was horrible to think of the lithe graceful figure of Slim Delaney, so captivating in its debonair ease, lying lax and stricken in the dust, the sardonic face staring with unseeing orbs into the blue sky above. It was terrible to know that the insolent mocking eyes which stirred in her strange fires might soon be no longer quick with life. That she was in love with this man she hated she could not disguise from herself.

Inside, she was a river of woe. Unwittingly she had drawn Delaney and his companions here. She had always wanted to come to Lost Park and when her brother Cole had offered to bring her she had been delighted. Not until she had met the doomed men yesterday did she know why she had been brought.

SHE rode back to the battle field, dismounted, and dropped the reins of Black Hawk. Through the brush she crept forward to a little hollow where her brother Cole had been lying two hours earlier. The place was empty. The empty shells showed where he had been. Abby guessed he had slipped closer to the rock fortress at the foot of the park wall.

In the sand she picked up his tracks. He had slipped into the brush to the left, creeping on hands and knees. Abby followed, her heart thumping fast. This was the deepest she had been in the firing zone. Through the mesquite she caught a glimpse of the rock pile which concealed the defenders. From it came a puff of smoke and the crack of a rifle.

She could see Cole now. He had dug in back of a black jack. So silently did she come on him that he jumped round with an oath.

Angrily he demanded what she was doing here.

"I can't stay away," she told him piteously. "Don't go on with it, Cole. Don't kill these men."

"Doggone it, haven't you got a lick of sense?" he exploded. "First thing you

know you're liable to get shot here. Why-for do you come bustin' in when it's none of yore business? Someone ought to wear out a hickory on you."

"It's got to stop," she said, and her face was wan with distress. "This is murder. That's what it is."

"You're crazy," he told her. "This Delaney is the gunman who has been killing our friends. Burris was with him when he bumped off Bert Benson and Stub Ransom. They're a bad bunch, but we've got them right at last and we aim to finish the job we've started. You get outa here and stay in the other end of the park. Hear me?"

A bullet whistled past them and cut a leaf from the black jack. Cole dragged his sister down into the hole.

"You crazy little fool. See what you've done. One of 'em saw you. Like enough you'll get hit before you get away."

"I don't care if I do," she cried wildly, and suddenly gave way to collapse into violent sobs.

"If you're so scared why did you come?" Cole asked, much exasperated. "Stop that yowling and scrouch down here. I'll get you out of it, you doggoned little fool."

"Why don't you stop it, Cole?" she begged. "Some of you will get killed—you or Lute or Uncle Mart or someone."

"I can tell you who'll get killed," he said callously. "That bull rattler up there in the rocks—him and his friends too. We'll wait a while before we work back in the brush outa here."

"All right. If you won't, you won't."

The sobs of Abby subsided. An idea had come to her. It was a wild and crazy one maybe, but there was a chance it might succeed. At any rate it would postpone the hour of the defenders' last stand.

CHAPTER XXXVII

IN THE ROCKS

THE big boulders had broken off from the cliff above more than a million years ago. They had crashed down pell-

mell upon one another, so that the position was ideal for defense.

Jim and his friends were not huddled together but were stationed about twenty yards apart, Buck in the center and the others on his right and left. Communication was easy by a passage back of the boulders.

Buck's shoulder pained a good deal and he was running a fever. He made no complaint, but his grin was a little tighter than usual. He was close to the spring. Fre-



quently he bathed his neck and face with cold water.

All three of the men at bay knew that unless help came from outside they were doomed, but they intended to make the best possible fight of it. Occasionally they called back and forth remarks more or less cheerful and jocose. They had scored four hits to date, or perhaps five, and each one was the cause of public jubilation. In their conversation all of them assumed that they were going to get out of this alive.

A bullet had creased Jack's forehead. Another had ricocheted from a rock and struck Jim in the arm, but with so little force as scarcely to break the skin. So far they had been lucky.

An hour would pass without a shot being fired, then for a time there would be almost a fusillade. Even during the lulls they exposed themselves as little as possible.

It was during one of the periods when the sniping was the liveliest that Jack let out an exclamation of warning.

"Look out, boys. Someone coming lick-itty split," he yelled. A moment later he added, "Good God! It's a woman."

She came out of the brush, her skirts gathered, running fast. When she reached the rocks she began clambering over them, moving straight toward the three beleaguered men.

The firing died.

Someone from the brush cried out, "Come back, you crazy fool!"

Cole Glidden left cover and cut across the open to intercept her. He was too late. For a moment he hesitated, as if about to follow her into the boulder field, but a bullet from Jim's rifle struck within a yard of his feet. To advance farther would be suicide. He shook his fist in their direction, cried out an oath, and scudded back to shelter. None of those among the rocks fired at him as he retreated.

Abby dodged in and out among the boulders. She was carrying a bucket. For a little they lost sight of her. When she reappeared it was just below the pile where the Cross Bar B men were hidden.

She lifted her face toward them and asked a question.

"How do I get up from here?"

"Swing round that big rock to the left," Jack told her.

Abby did as directed. Using some broken boulders as stepping stones, she crossed a natural stile and came down into the runway connecting the posts of the three men.

She looked at Corcoran, at Burris, and then at Delaney.

"I've brought you some food," she said. "I thought maybe you might be hungry."

They stared at her in astonishment. She had run a gauntlet of fire to bring food to those for whom she held a lusty hate.

Buck said gently, "That was right foolish, Miss Glidden. You might have been shot before we noticed you were a woman."

Ironically Jim smiled. "If you'd only beat the triangle we would have come out for dinner and saved you the trouble of bringing it," he said.

HIS sarcasm passed Abby unnoticed. Fear and anxiety had been so present with her for many hours that her mind had no room for anything else.

"You aren't hurt?" she asked, her eyes still on Delaney.

"Hurt? Why, no! What made you think we might be hurt? We're just picnicking in the rocks." Jim drawled it out with bitter derision. "Jack is playing pirate. That's why he is wearing that bandanna round his head. Buck is in the game too."

"You'd better move one way or the other, miss," Jack said. "Where you stand yore head can be seen by some of them. They might make a mistake."

Abby moved, toward Jim. "They have sent men up by the north trail to the cliffs above to shoot down at you," she said. "I came to warn you."

"We've been wondering when they would think of that," Buck mentioned. "How long ago did they send them?"

"About half an hour."

"That ought to give us an hour yet," Jack guessed. "After that we'll have to lie mighty low." He looked at Jim, for information. "What about Miss Glidden?"

"I'm going to stay here," she announced definitely. "They won't shoot at you while I'm in the rocks."

"Do you figure on spending the rest of yore life here?" Jim asked. "Or is it yore idea to go out and forage food for us once in a while."

"I don't know. I couldn't stand it any longer." Abby's big eyes were fastened on Jim. They betrayed shamelessly her secret.

Young Delaney felt his pulses hammering. His cynicism was a fraud. The thing she had done set excitement strumming in his blood. He knew she had come to save him if she could.

"Got to get to my post," he said abruptly. "Yore friends may be getting busy."

He moved back to his place. Abby followed him. An outjutting mass of quartz shut them off from sight of the other men.

Through a loophole he swept the mesquite valley just below.

"Do you see any of them?" Abby asked.

"No. They keep out of sight."

"Let me look."

"You stay down there," he told her roughly.

"Yes," she said obediently.

It was strange, this change that had come over her. Through the countryside she was known for her heady wilfulness. She had followed her own lawless impulse. No man had ever restrained her, except her father on rare occasions. Now she was taking orders meekly from a man who still at times stirred in her passionate resentment. The anxious hours had taken their toll of her pride. She was just now chastened and subdued.

The space between the rocks was narrow. There was room for the two of them and no more. Jim paid as little attention to her as possible but he was acutely aware of her presence. She could not move without brushing against him. If he turned, his eyes looked into hers and he found gifts in them that set fires blazing in him. She was elemental and knew none of the arts of concealment.

"We're crowded here," he said bluntly. "There's more room farther over."

Immediately she left him. That he had hurt her feelings he guessed. He wanted to call her back and show that he was friendly, but he did not do so. To have her so near him was disturbing. She had the vital beauty and grace of a wild young forest creature. Jim Delaney was no ascetic. The hot youth in him responded imperiously to the call she made on him.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

"You Doggoned Old Trouble Hunter"

A MAN waving a piece of white cotton cloth emerged from the brush. Abby offered her handkerchief to Jack. He stood on a rock and held it up. The man below moved forward into the boulder field.

"It's my brother Lute," Abby announced.

Jim let the envoy come to within easy talking distance before he stopped him. "You can talk from there right comfortably," he said.

"I want to talk to my sister first," Luther said.

"Go ahead. Nobody is preventing you."

"Come out where I can see you, Abby," her brother ordered.

Abby climbed on a rock and stood beside Jim.

"I'm ashamed of you, girl," Luther reproved. "No right thinking young woman acts the way you're doing. It ain't modest



for a girl to go throwing in with a bunch of strangers. You'll get a bad name through the country if you don't look out. You got no right to throw your own family down for these Corcorans. Folks will sure talk."

"What will they say—that I'm the sister of a lot of killers who used me to trap the men they couldn't get the best of any other way?" she asked waspishly.

"You know doggone well what they'll say—that there must be something between you and this scalawag Delaney or you wouldn't be so anxious to protect him from what he has earned. A girl must look after her good name, Abby. Now you come along back with me and we won't say any more about it."

"And what about these three men, Lute?"

"That's our business, girl, and we'll 'tend to it without any help from you," he told her brusquely.

"Then I'll stay here."

Luther lost his patience. "Goddle-mighty, girl, you can't stay with an outfit of strange men. Haven't you got any decency? We're your kinfolks, and we'll look after you."

"You looked after me fine when you brought me here as a decoy for the men you wanted to kill," she flung at him bitterly. "I'm not going with you. I'll stay here till I know these men are safe."

"But it's not right," argued Luther. "It's scandalous. That's what it is. Dad will wear you to a frazzle for this."

That was possible, since Sim had the Glidden unruly temper. But it was more likely she would be punished some other way.

"That will be his business and mine," Abby retorted.

Luther appealed to Delaney. "Fellow, I don't like you any better than I do a sidewinder, but if you have a lick of sense you know you're only making it worse by letting her stay with you. We've got you dead to rights, and we'll clean up on you sure."

Jim grinned maliciously. "I'm only a strange man. I wouldn't have more influence with her than a loving brother."

"If you're white men you don't want a girl mixed up in this," the lank Glidden urged. "You're game enough to take what's coming to you, ain't you?"

"We didn't mix any young lady up in it," Jim countered. "You did that. You mixed two in it. As to yore sister, it's not our fault she has been brought up so badly she won't stand for cold-blooded killing."

Dark anger boiled up into Luther's face. "You're a nice guy to talk about cold-blooded killing after what you did to Benson and Ransom."

"If you're quite through——"

ONCE more Luther tried to persuade his sister. "Be reasonable, Abby. There's no sense in acting thisaway. It's not the proper way to do, dad gum it."

"The proper thing would be for me to leave here and let you murder these men," she cried scornfully. "Well, I won't do it. No use talking any more."

"What's that?" Jack cried, and pointed to a cloud of dust in the chaparral. "It's a bunch of horsemen heading this way."

All of them turned to look. He was right. A compact body of riders could be seen moving through the brush.

Luther ambled back on a long-legged lope to his friends. It was time to be getting out in a hurry. Those holding the rocks dropped back to cover. From their points of observation they saw the newcomers open out and sweep through the mesquite.

The crack of guns sounded. Men shouted hoarsely one to another. Riders scudded in and out of the brush, dodging out of the net spread for them.

"The Gliddens are heading for the north trail," Jack cried excitedly. "One of 'em is down. He's up again and has grabbed his horse."

The firing continued intermittently. It would die away, and then another shot would sound. Jim drew a bead on a galloping rider. Before he could fire, his rifle was pushed violently aside.

Abby had flung herself at the barrel. She was white to the lips.

Jim nodded. "That's right," he said gently. "They are yore kin."

"We'd better be moving down from here," Jack suggested. "The fracas is about over."

A man on horseback rode out of the brush to the edge of the boulder field and waved at them.

"It's King Cooper," Jim said, and he let out a glad shout.

Five minutes later Cooper shook hands with him. "You doggoned old trouble hunter," he drawled.

"How did you find yore way into the park?" Jim asked.

"Charley Pierce guided us. He's on my posse. Half a dozen rangers are with us."

"Anybody hurt?"

"One ranger killed, another wounded. We've captured two or three of the Glidden gang and killed one. A fellow called Hatcher. I reckon this business will spell good night for the Gliddens." He turned a quizzical eye on Jim, nodding toward the rocks above. "Who is your lady friend, Slim?"

"Abby Glidden. She ran up here an hour ago to stop them from firing at us."

King showed surprise. "That was right clever of her," he said.

"Has anything been heard of Rose Corcoran?" Jim asked.

"Yes, she came home." Cooper added dryly. "You'd never guess who found her."

"Then there wouldn't be any use trying."

"Your friend Dave Meldrum."

Jim stared. "Meldrum?"

"That's the name of the gent. Haven't heard particulars yet. Maybe he was scared. He'd better be if he was in this skulduggery."

THE captured Gliddens were Brad, Cole, and Luther. They sat together, guarded, sullen and silent. When Abby walked over and tried to talk with them they turned upon her in bitter anger.

It was decided by King Cooper and the ranger sergeant that the party should be divided for the home trip. Part of them would push on down to Eagle Pass with the prisoners, the rest would follow more slowly bringing the wounded with them. Abby Glidden and Jim Delaney went with the advance guard.

Abby rode with her relatives, though they treated her as if she were responsible for the disaster that had befallen them. All day she was very low in spirits. Her father would probably blame her for the stand she had taken. Moreover, she knew that her infatuation for Jim Delaney could bring her no happiness. From what her brother had told her she guessed he was in love with Rose Corcoran.

After supper Jim fixed blankets for her

a little way from the others. She watched him silently.

"Anything more?" he asked, after he had finished."

"Nothing," she said in a small voice bleak with despair.

Jim felt immensely sorry for her and greatly drawn to her. He straightened the blankets a little so as not to look at her.

"You're getting a bad break," he said gently.

"Does it matter?" she broke out. "I'm only a Glidden, and besides—I'm a fool."

"It's the kind of foolishness a man could think a heap of you for," he murmured.

"If he wasn't too busy thinking a heap of another girl," she said bitterly.

There was nothing he could say to that—nothing that would comfort her. But he had to say something. He rose and took her hands in his.

"Some day you're going to love a man who will think all the world of you," he told her.

"Am I?" she flung at him. "It's nice of you to say so."

"It's true. And this won't amount to a hill of beans then."

She made a prophecy. "I'm never going to see you any more, unless it's after you have married that other girl. You're going away from me. Do you think I don't know it?"

"Maybe. I don't know about that. But you may be right. I wouldn't be welcomed by yore father and brothers, would I? But I'll say this. If I live to be a hundred I'll never forget you—never. There is nobody else in the world like you."

"But you like that Corcoran girl better," she said drearily.

Then with passionate ferocity, she threw her arms around his neck, held him savagely tight, and kissed him again and again.

Her hands fell away from him. She dropped her head and turned it aside. "Please go away," she begged in a voice ready to break.

Jim walked out to the remuda, as if to

take care of his horse. He did not want the other men to see his face yet.

CHAPTER XXXIX

LOCK, STOCK, AND BARREL

LIEUTENANT BRISBANE of the Rangers was talking, to an audience that listened intently to every word. Those present included six Gliddens, Pike Corcoran and his two daughters, Jack Corcoran, King Cooper, Jim Delaney, Buck Burris, and three rangers.

"We've been waiting for years to call the turn on you, Sim," Brisbane said. "Of course we've been satisfied your outfit is responsible for a lot of this rustling that has been going on around these parts. I



have in my hands evidence that three of you were implicated in that hold-up of the Austin stage."

Brad Glidden cut in harshly. "If you can prove that why don't you send us over the road?"

"Did I mention your name, Brad?" the lieutenant asked suavely.

"You looked at me."

"All right. I'll look at you again and answer your question. My evidence isn't quite strong enough to convict. At least it wasn't a week or two ago. Now you're in so bad a jury might think it was sufficient. Want me to find out?"

Brad glared at him angrily but did not answer.

Brisbane went on, addressing Sim. "You had folks afraid of your crowd. Scared to tell what they knew. But since all this trouble flared up again and they saw your side getting the worst of it their tongues have unloosened a lot. For instance, you

hired those two vaqueros to testify Slim Delaney was present with Charley Pitman when the two Mexicans were killed. I sweated it out of them."

"That's a lie," Sim said. He sat heavy and inert in a chair, his big body overflowing from it. No expression registered in his opaque eyes to show that he knew the Gliddens had come to the end of their trail in Texas.

"Two of your sons and one of their cousins kidnapped Miss Corcoran," the officer went on evenly. "At least two of their kin were in cahoots with them before the crime and several others were accessories after the fact. The job was done to trap Delaney and Burris into Lost Park. After your outfit succeeded in that they did their best to kill them. If it hadn't been for Miss Abby they would probably have done it."

"We deny the kidnapping," Sim said, in a voice that lacked any life. "Only Corcoran evidence as to that. My boys had a right to go with their sister to the park. This Delaney and his confederates followed them there to drygulch them. After all the killing of our men he has done would you expect my boys to let the wolf go?"

"We've gone into that," Brisbane said. "No use taking it up again. Delaney has never been the aggressor in any of these difficulties. We have confessions to prove that."

"He never gave Ransom and Benson a chance."

"He didn't kill Ransom and Benson. At least there is no evidence to show he did. We've already covered that, Sim. Your gang killed one ranger and wounded another when my men went in to Lost Park to arrest them."

"They didn't know they were rangers. Thought they were a bunch of Pike Corcoran's killers come in to wipe 'em out."

"Too thin, Sim. Sergeant Haines yelled to your crowd two or three times that they were rangers. They deliberately resisted arrest."

"What's the use of all this talk, Bris-

bane?" demanded Sim heavily. "Why don't you say right out that Corcoran has got control of the rangers to frame us Gliddens?"

"Because it wouldn't be true," the lieutenant told him quietly. "Fact is, that at last your chickens have come home to roost. You thought the law wouldn't ever reach you. Well, it has. One of two things. You can take your choice. Either we'll press every charge to the limit—and we have at least nine against different members of your family and friends—or your whole outfit will move out of Texas lock, stock, and barrel. You can gather your stock and drive it out when you go."

"Can we drive our ranches with us?" Sim asked.

"You can turn them over to agents to sell for you. I'm stretching the law in your favor. You know that. This has all been talked out by those in authority. We know that if we hang one or two of you and land one or two in the pen we'll make outlaws of the rest. It's better to get you out of the country. In another state you can make a fresh start."

"How long do we have to gather our stock?" Sim asked.

"How long will it take you?"

SIM consulted with his brothers and named a time. Brisbane accepted the date as fair.

"There's to be no trouble in the meantime," the officer added. "If you start anything, the deal is off. We'll go through with the charges against you."

Brad stopped Delaney on the way out of the room.

"Fellow, you're lucky," he said with restrained anger. "I'd give all I've got in the world for one crack at you."

Jim smiled grimly, and passed him without speaking.

Colonel Corcoran walked down the street with Jim, his nephew and Buck Burris behind them.

"Yes, Brad is right," Pike said. "You're lucky. I reckon the Glidden girl saved

all three of you. I'm lucky too. I have my daughter back—both of them. I've been a damned stiff necked fool, Slim." His voice broke a trifle. "I always wanted to make up with Marie and was too stubborn. If I hadn't been so bullheaded she would never have married Meldrum. Thank God, it's all past now."

"Miss Marie is a fine woman," Slim said. "I knew that soon as I met her."

"About Abby Glidden," Pike said abruptly. "Nothing between you and her?"

"No," Jim said, and added no details.

The colonel laid a hand affectionately on Delaney's shoulder. "Glad of that, son. It wouldn't work out, not with the Gliddens hating you the way they do."

A warm glow passed through Jim. He felt that Corcoran meant more than he said. It had passed through his mind more than once of late that he would be acceptable to his employer as a son-in-law.

Jim tried his luck with Rose that afternoon.

Left alone with him, Rose was seized with a sudden shyness. She knew what was in her mind and suspected what was in his.

"I'm glad it's all over," she murmured. "I've been so dreadfully worried—for father."

"We've been some worried for you," he said. "Till we heard you were safe home."

"They didn't hurt me. They kept telling me not to be afraid."

"Yes, but they didn't tell us not to be afraid," he answered, smiling. "They kind of forgot that. I didn't think they would hurt you, but I couldn't be sure after they were crazy enough to take you away."

"Anyhow, everything is all right now," she said.

"Or will be soon."

Rose looked at him quickly, then looked away. She felt the color flushing her cheeks. He was going to speak now. She wanted to run away.

"If you feel the way I do," he added.

Her gaze came back to his, reluctantly, as if drawn by a magnet.

"Soon the Gliddens will be gone," she mentioned, dodging into a side path.

He waved that aside. "They've gone already far as we are concerned. I'm not talking about them, but about us." He took her little hand in his big brown one and glanced down at it. His fingers closed on hers. "How about—for always, Rose?"

She nodded, ever so little, then buried her face in his shoulder.

CHAPTER XL

"He Had It Coming"

FOR the last time Dave Meldrum was walking down Houston Street. Men looked at him askance. If they could avoid meeting him, they did so. If not, they nodded curtly. For Meldrum was leaving town in disgrace, driven out by the force of public opinion.

The Green Curtain had been closed and an ultimatum given him to get out of San Antonio at once. It would be impossible for him to realize anything on his investment in the gambling house and dance hall. Nobody wanted to buy the lease, furniture, and good will of a house in such ill repute as his.

He laid this disaster at the hands of one man, and black anger surged in his heart. Slim Delaney was responsible for it. From that first hour when they had met at The Green Curtain there had been nothing but trouble. Dave thought of the man now with savage fury. The fellow had been invulnerable. The battle at the lumber yard was still an impossible mystery. The escape from the gambling house was another. Time and again he had been within reach of the Gliddens and they had failed to make an end of him. His success had been so astonishing that many accepted it as fatalism.

That was nonsense of course. The fellow had been lucky. Meldrum would have liked a chance to prove it. Not now, for he would not dare kill Delaney at this time

in San Antonio. But somewhere else, if by chance they ever met.

At that moment Jim Delaney swung round the corner and came straight up the street to meet him. Gone was the gambler's caution, gone his judgment. A wave of black hatred swept all other considerations aside.

He ripped out a furious oath. His revolver jumped from the scabbard.

"Come a-shooting," he cried, and blazed away.

Three times his weapon sounded before that of the younger man got into action. That Meldrum missed can be accounted for only because of the fact that his consuming hate would not let him wait until the other was close.

Both men emptied their revolvers.

Someone, amazed, cried down from a window, "By jinks, not a single hit."

He spoke too soon. Meldrum stood for a moment after the roar of the guns ceased, straight and rigid, malice still frozen on his face. A quiver ran through his body.

A slack arm fell to his side and from nerveless fingers the revolver dropped. He swayed on his feet, plunged forward to the ground. Once his shoulder twitched. After that not a muscle moved.

Slowly Jim moved forward. He looked down at the inert sprawling body.

"I call you all to witness he fired first," he said.

From the doors of stores men began to trickle. They came out slower than they had gone in. Half a dozen of them confirmed Delaney's claim.

"He had it coming," an old cattleman said. "Ever since that day he shot down Pike Corcoran at Eagle Pass."

"Y'betcha."

"Sure had."

"Been askin' this boy for it."

Jim turned and walked slowly away. It came to him clearly that this hour had been preparing ever since that day, half a lifetime ago if one measured time by its fullness, when he had sauntered into The Green Curtain to see the elephant.

THE END

And next time

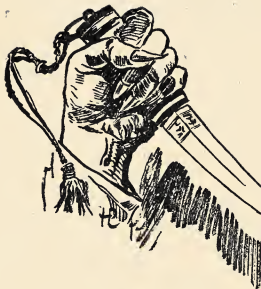
Part I of a Two Part Story

by

ALBERT RICHARD WETJEN

*A thrilling adventure on the
high seas—*

"The Middle Watch"



THE LAST OF THE SONS OF HEAVEN

By CHARLES GILSON

Author of

"The Undesirable Alien," etc.

THOUGH they had planed down near the Shanghai race-course soon after daybreak that morning, word of their expected arrival had been 'phoned from Yokohama, and an enthusiastic crowd had been there to greet them. Dead beat and hungry as a couple of stray wolves, they had been taken into the house of a wealthy Scotchman who had given them breakfast, after which they had slept for eight hours before moving into the Nestor House Hotel in Shanghai where they had booked a suite of rooms.

There Dale Dahl threw himself into a chair, looked across at Larry Henniker, and laughed.

"Larry," he exclaimed, "give me a drink, for the love of Mike!"

Henniker tipped a tot of whiskey into a tumbler, filled it with sodawater, and passed it across to Dale.

"You want it," said he. "And so do I, for the matter of that! Of all the unadulterated bilge I ever listened to in my life that speech of yours took the cake!"

"Good, Larry! Not so bad for a so-called scholar. Even admitting you can listen to bilge, I fail to see how it can take any sort of cake. However, I do know that if I have to make any more speeches, I swear I'll give up flying altogether. But you see how it is now; I can't get out

of it. It's like a forced landing every time, and a mighty bad one, too."

Henniker nodded in mock approval.

"Mighty bad!" he agreed. "But you're for it again tonight, Dale. They're giving a banquet in our honor. Write it out first and learn it by heart, this time. They're putting it on the radio."

Dale Dahl, wondering whether it were worth it to have his name known in five continents before he was twenty-six, rose from his chair and helped himself to another drink. The name itself had always struck him as the most ridiculous name he had ever heard, and now that he had seen it so often in print, it seemed sillier than ever.

His father, whose forbears had come from Denmark, had married a daughter of James Rickard Dale, one of the most successful men on Wall Street; and they had combined their alliterating surnames in their only male offspring. Dale may have blamed them for that, but at the same time he had to admit that he owed all this unsolicited publicity to his parents, who had supplied him with the wherewithal to indulge his passion for flying. For Dahl Senior had made as much money out of artificial silk in Chicago as Dale Senior out of artificial market values in New York—in other words, Dale's stocks and Dahl's stockings had produced the enterprising

young man who had beaten the Atlantic both ways and who had now crossed the Pacific from San Francisco to Shanghai in record time.

As Larry turned away from the window, there came a knock on the door.

"Seems as if there's no peace for the innocents abroad," he sighed. "Come in!"

The Chinese hall porter entered, carrying a lacquer tray which he held before Dale Dahl as if it were something official.

Picking up a printed visiting-card, Dale looked at it with a puzzled expression.

"Say, Larry," he cried, "what do you make of this? His Excellency, General Kwo-fung-lo—that's in English. There's Chinese writing underneath."

"Kwo-fung-lo!" Larry exclaimed. "The famous General Kwo, the man they call the Chinese Mussolini. What on earth can he want to see us about?"

Dale shook his head.

"Don't know. I shouldn't have thought he would have cared two straws about air records. Maybe I ought to go down and fetch him up?"

The Chinaman had evidently understood.

"General say more better him speak you all alone," he intervened. "Him say him pidgin all same plivate."

"Private, eh? Well, ask him to come right along. We'll be delighted to meet him."

As the man left the room, Dale turned to Larry.

"Can he speak English?" he asked.

"Of course he can. Kwo-fung-lo was a military attaché in the Great War, and when he came back to China, he set up as a war-lord, bust the Canton communists, put the fear of God into the Peking government, and took over the control of three provinces at the head of about thirty thousand troops."

Larry Henniker was a loose-jointed big-boned fellow with a mop of red unruly hair who took few things seriously, especially himself. He had nothing of his friend's good looks, but he was one of those fortunate young men whom Nature has blessed with both brains and brawn, to compensate for a lack of worldly goods. A brilliant scholar at college and magnificent athlete, he took his varied accomplishments as a matter of course. Dale loved the man like a brother. Long nights above mid-ocean and the clouds, with the roar of their engine in their ears, had brought these two nearer together than they would ever dream of admitting.

"Say," Larry went on, as if he had got a sudden idea, "I know for a fact the old fellow bought half a dozen planes from the States a month or so ago! Do you think he has come here to offer us a job?"

"If he has," said Dale, "maybe I'll take it. What about you?"

"Why not? At any rate there won't be any more speeches."

**Two Record-breaking
American Flyers Land in
China—and Then Take
Off for an Amazing
Adventure**



The door was opened by the porter who now had a kind of hang-dog look, as if at any moment he expected to be hustled off to the execution yard; and His Excellency, General Kwo-fung-lo, walked into the room.

HE WAS dressed in khaki uniform that fitted him none too well; and in spite of two rows of medal ribbons, no one could have looked less like a soldier. He was narrow chested, stooping and could not have been more than five feet five in height. Yet, in spite of the cadaverous complexion of his face, the slanting eyes were keen, hard as flint and penetrating, and the mouth and chin, half hidden by the sparse straggling hairs of a drooping mustache, expressed a degree of determination that was almost disconcerting.

"This is a great honor, General," said Dale, as Kwo-fung-lo bowed.

"The honor is mine," said he.

He spoke English perfectly, but very slowly.

"Won't you sit down?"

Dale began to feel uncomfortable under those hard searching eyes. He indicated the arm-chair in which he himself had been sitting, but General Kwo took a straight-backed chair at the table.

"May I congratulate you both on your wonderful achievements in the air," he began. "A few years ago such things would have been impossible. I happened to be in Shanghai on business when you arrived."

The war-lord lay back in his chair and

folded his hands, as if he had much to say and plenty of time in which to say it.

"What success I have had in life," he began, "I attribute to an ability to estimate human character and a habit of making the most of my opportunities. Your unexpected arrival in this city coinciding with my visit, it occurred to me that you might be of great service to me, if you were so disposed."

"In what way?" Dale asked.

"I cannot tell you that until I have made a certain request. I have come here of my own free will to give you certain information that would astonish the whole world: a secret that has been kept for nearly four hundred years."

Larry glanced furtively at Dale, and saw at once that there was something in the personality of the general that had got both of them. In a way, they were like a couple of kids, all agog for a fairy tale—and the story to which they now listened was nearly as fantastic as that.

"You have doubtless heard about our secret societies," General Kwo went on. "Well, they exist today as much as they ever did. I myself am the president of a society—Chinese, not Tartar or Manchu, you appreciate the difference—which safeguards a certain secret. That secret I cannot tell you until I have your word of honor that on no account will you ever divulge a word of what you know. You need not take this oath. That rests with you."

He paused, to see the effect of what he had said.



"You both understand the nature of an oath," he went on. "I am assured that I find myself in the company of two gentlemen who are as honorable as they are gallant."

"I hope you're right," said Dale, who felt he had to say something.

"In such matters I am seldom wrong," General Kwo replied. "But tell me, are you prepared to take this oath, in my presence—now?"

DALE caught Larry's eye, and together they nodded. And then, after they had sworn, by God and on their honor, they sat and listened to a story that they found it hard to believe.

"In the first place I must tell you," the general began, "that I am in great financial difficulties. I do not mean myself; private money troubles are nothing, and besides, I have all the money I want for my personal needs. But I have an army to keep up, and that is not so easy. I maintain law and order in three provinces, and if I cannot pay my troops, law and order will go by the board. They will turn bandit, and the country will be in a worse state than ever. I exact tribute and taxes from the peasants, but this is not enough. For months I have been paying out money from my own pocket, and now my funds are finished.

"Yet," he went on, "in the old days, mine was the richest family in all China. To the last monarch of the Ming Dynasty my ancestor presented a necklace of gigantic rubies that today would be worth a fortune. It is to recover that necklace that I have come to ask your assistance, but I do not want it for myself."

"For your soldiers?" Dale suggested.

"To pay my soldiers," General Kwo corrected. "But I will pay them no longer. They will be paid by the Emperor of China in whose service they will be."

Both Americans looked astonished. It was Larry who spoke.

"But China is now a republic!" he exclaimed.

"That may be so, but my army and myself mean to change all that. You may not be aware that the great Chinese Ming dynasty was founded by a priest. That is an important point because this priest came from a monastery in Si-Chuan on the borders of Tibet, which is called the Temple of Righteous Harmony, and that is the name of the secret society to which I belong and whose secret I am about to tell you.

"I must remind you that the last Chinese Emperor committed suicide when the Manchus established themselves in Peking in the middle of the seventeenth century. Now it has been generally believed all these years that the Imperial family of the Mings is extinct; but it so happens that a certain prince of the name of Ming-lu-kwong managed to escape from the Forbidden City with his young and beautiful wife.

"They naturally fled into the interior, and after undergoing the most rigorous hardships, they arrived at the Temple of Righteous Harmony on the frontier of Tibet. It was as if a benignant deity had guided their footsteps to the cradle of their illustrious race. Declaring their identity to the lama brethren, they were admitted.

"Now these lamas are often unscrupulous, and they were not slow to realize that they might use their secret to some advantage. A secret society was formed whose object was to preserve the lawful heirs to the Dragon Throne. They alone knew that a child had been born in the monastery who was the rightful Son of Heaven, instead of the usurping Manchu in Peking. They therefore selected a girl-child, of noble birth, and secretly conveyed her to the monastery as the future bride of the Prince.

"This, gentlemen," Kwo-fung-lo continued, "though you may find it hard to believe, has been going on for centuries. The real Son of Heaven still exists, with the blood of the Mings in his veins, and that Prince still wears the ruby necklace that was presented to his ancestor by mine, four hundred years ago. That necklace alone

could pay the expenses of a campaign. Perhaps you realize the great significance of what I have told you?"

THE general lay back in his chair, his eyes moving from Dale Dahl to Larry.

"Gosh!" Larry exclaimed. "It takes a bit of grasping!"

"Listen," the general took him up. "China can never be a successful republic for centuries yet. If a new China is to arise out of this chaos, it will be once again as an empire."

"Maybe," said Larry. "But there's a lot I don't understand yet. You're the strong man of China, General, with a powerful army at your back; why don't you proclaim the empire and let off the fireworks? And what do you want us for? We've never been mixed up in international affairs. We're just a couple of aviators who happen to have planed down in China because it's this side of Asia."

"Let me explain," the general replied. "When the Manchus were in power, if the secret had leaked out, the living Prince would have been murdered in a week; and if the monks have kept our secret, they have done so because they have been well paid. For all these years the Emperor could have been in no safer place. There are communists who would assassinate him, brigands who would seize him and hold him for ransom, and republicans who would show him no mercy."

"But why not a *coup d'état*, General?" Dale suggested.

"Just what I propose," General Kwo replied, "but not the kind of thing you imagine. If I marched my unpaid army across Si-Chuan, I would have to fight every inch of the way. The monks would get word of my advance, and guessing my object, they would have removed the young Emperor and his wife over the frontier long before I got there. Besides you must remember the rubies. These lamas are avaricious. No, there is only one way of doing it. With only three or four men

I propose to fly to the monastery, and that is why I have come to you. A glorious enterprise! If we succeed, we shall have accomplished something that will stand out in the pages of history, we shall have re-established the greatest dynasty the world has ever known."

Kwo-fung-lo rose to his feet.

"And now, gentlemen," said he, "I am about to leave you."

"Do you mean," asked Dale, "you don't want our answer now?"

"It is not a step to be taken in a light-hearted manner. All the same there is no time to waste. Once I have made up my mind, I act quickly. That is my reputation."

"And you have quite made up your mind about this?"

"Quite. I shall greatly value your help."

"And when do you want our answer?"

"Tomorrow morning. I understand you are both attending a public dinner tonight. It would be best for me not to call here again. I am too well-known; I have many enemies, and wherever I go I am watched. One of my staff officers, a Captain Quang, will come here at nine o'clock. If you have then decided to help me, you will accompany him to a house in the French Concession, not far from the south gate in the City wall. There we can discuss the necessary details. I have the honor to wish you good day."

AS HE closed the door behind him, Dale turned to Larry.

"Well," he asked, "and what do you make of that?"

"Makes one feel as if the clock had been put back about four hundred years," Larry replied. "Are we going to do it, or not?"

"I wouldn't think twice about it, if it didn't mean such a lot. About four hundred million people, a ruby necklace worth a fortune, and the future of one of the largest countries in the world! That makes you think before you jump, and you can't get away from that."

"We had best sleep on it, Dale," Larry

said, "and see how we feel in the morning. There's this dinner tonight. When you've got that speech off your chest, you may be able to make up your mind."

Dale opened the door into his bedroom, and at once let out an exclamation of surprise.

"Look here!" he cried. "We've got a valet fit for a king!"

Henniker went to the door and looked into the bedroom which opened on to the passage. Dale had unlocked his trunks, but had made no attempt to unpack. Most of the contents had apparently been put away, but a studded white shirt, socks and underclothes had been carefully laid out on the bed, as well as an evening suit that had been brushed and tidily folded.

"I wonder," said Larry forlornly, "whether anything like this has happened to me?"

Together they crossed the sitting-room and looked into the other bedroom where they could see no sign of Larry's clothes.

"Expect he has taken them away to hold a post-mortem on them," Dale suggested, as he pressed the bell. "I'm going to see what this paragon looks like."

They did not have to wait thirty seconds before the door was opened by a man who was like a kind of human balloon. He was dressed in white ducks. His figure was circular, his stomach protruding. He had no legs worth mentioning, and his featureless expressionless face resembled an inverted soup-plate.

"Master ring?" he asked.

"Yes," said Dale, "I did. Are you responsible for this?"

"Not speak velly much English. My name Mister Wong."

"Oh, Wong, is it? Well, when did you come in here and unpack? And who told you to?"

"Comprador say you wantche. My savvy all this pidgin. Everything belong proper."

Dale winked at Larry.

"Looks as if he's sort of taken charge," he observed.

"If he can make that old dinner coat of mine look respectable," said Larry, "he's next thing to a wizard."

THAT evening they had to listen to the usual eulogies and compliments, while they ate and drank a lot more than was good for them in a room crowded with prosperous-looking men of nearly every nationality in the world—all the consuls, the leading business men, bankers, brokers and merchants in the International Concession. In addition to these there were several influential Chinese at the dinner, among them an immaculate little man who was introduced to them as "the celebrated Doctor Ling."

Though still quite a young man, Ling had the reputation of being a force to be reckoned with in politics, as well as the editor of the leading native newspaper published in Shanghai. Though dressed in evening clothes, his features were typically Oriental; his complexion like lemon-colored parchment, and behind his gold-rimmed spectacles were the almond-shaped eyes of a Cantonese.

He seemed particularly anxious to know how long they proposed to stay in Shanghai, and afterwards invited them to come round to his house for a nightcap, which they refused on the plea that they had already had as much to drink as they wanted.

Soon after that they made their escape into the open air. It was a beautiful night, and the way to their hotel took them along the riverside, where the lights on the anchored steamers and the oil-paper lanterns on the sampans vied with the moon's reflection on the broken surface of the water.

Halting at a place where the road they were following skirted the bund, Dale grasped Larry by an arm.

"Larry," he cried, "we're going into this thing! We're going right away from here to the mountains of Tibet. We're not members of a secret society for nothing—we're going to put an emperor on a throne!"

"Best sleep on it," Larry said. "I feel a bit excited myself. It's the liquor, my lad. I never drank so much fizz in my life."

"No," said Dale, suddenly serious. "I'll think the same way tomorrow. Are you coming with me? You needn't, if you'd rather not."

Larry seized him by the scruff of the neck. Though Dahl was not a small man, Larry was a good three inches the taller.

"Do you think you could ever do without me?" he asked. "Not on your life or mine! We'll sink or swim together."

A limousine car, driven by a Chinese chauffeur, came purring up the main road behind them, and to their surprise came to a standstill a few yards from where they were standing. In the back seat they recognized "the celebrated Doctor Ling," who leaped out and came toward them with both arms outstretched.

"Here you are!" he exclaimed, as if relieved to see them. "Not a minute after you had left, I received a message from General Kwo."

Both the Americans looked surprised—and little wonder!

"A message from Kwo! About what?"

Larry asked, feeling much the same sort of antipathy toward the little man as that of a big dog for a cat.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. Bareheaded, wearing an overcoat, and with the moonlight gleaming on his circular spectacles, he looked more like a monstrous owl than a human being.

"Is that material?" he asked. "Even if I were disposed to do so, I could scarcely tell you now. It is enough that I give you the message the general sends you, without suggesting for a moment that I even know what he means. He says unexpected circumstances have cropped up that make it necessary for him to have your answer tonight. He wants me to ring him up the very moment I get home. If you decline to accept his offer, I am to let him know at once; but if on the other hand you decide in his favor, you are to come back with

me to my house, and he himself will join us there as soon as he possibly can."

"I see," said Larry doubtfully. "But this is short notice."

"You mean you have not yet made up your minds?"

Larry looked at Dale.

"Have we, Dale?" he asked.

Dale Dahl never hesitated.

"Every time!" he exclaimed. "As you said yourself, Larry, we'll sink or swim



together. Doctor, we'll come right along."

"Good! The general will be delighted. Step into the car, Mr. Dahl, if you please. There will be plenty of room for the three of us on the back seat. I myself have the misfortune to be very small."

WHILE the little Chinese doctor kept up a running flow of conversation, they passed the aerodrome where that morning they had left *The Albatross*, the famous monoplane that Dale Dahl had taken very nearly all round the world, and in a few minutes they found themselves in open country.

Presently the car turned into a by road, and thence through opened gates, to stop before the portico of a small Chinese *fu* that had been converted into a modern villa with an artificial stucco front.

The hall they entered was furnished with a few carved blackwood chairs and tables, and dimly illumined by a bronze lantern suspended from the ceiling.

Doctor Ling, after taking off his overcoat and flinging it on to one of the chairs, opened a door to the right and switched on the electric light.

"You see, I am quite civilized here," he remarked. "I had the light, water and a telephone installed at a very considerable expense."

Dale and Larry Henniker followed him into a room, where the walls were draped in silk embroideries. In the center was a carved pedestal writing-desk upon which were a telephone-receiver and several jade letter-weights.

"I pray you, be seated," the little doctor bowed. "Make yourselves thoroughly at home. I will give you my attention in a moment. It is first necessary that I get in touch with the general, and let him know that you are here."

Seating himself at the desk, he picked up the telephone-receiver, exchanged a few words in Chinese with the operator, and then apparently got the man he wanted, for they heard him pronounce the words, "Kwo-fung-lo."

"Excellent!" he exclaimed, rising from the chair at the desk. "Most excellent. The general asks me to tell you that he will be here as soon as he possibly can. In the meantime let me offer you a drink."

Going to a lacquer cupboard, he took out glasses and a syphon of sodawater.

"Brandy or whiskey?" he asked.

Dale was going to refuse, but Larry answered quickly. He was looking the doctor straight in the eyes.

"Brandy," said he. "And Dale will take the same. It goes best with champagne."

Doctor Ling half turned away from them, ostensibly to hold a glass up to the light as he poured out the brandy. Then he began to fill two glasses from the syphon.

"Say when?" he asked—and there was something unnatural in his voice.

Larry drew near to the little man and spoke in a voice that was the next thing to a threat.

"You're joining us, Doctor, aren't you?" he said, without moving his eyes from the other's face.

Ling seemed unable not to look at him. He spoke in a voice that was little above a whisper.

"Certainly, if you wish it, though I very seldom drink."

AS THE doctor filled another glass for himself, even Dale noticed that his hand was shaking visibly, and he was so surprised at this that for the moment he left his drink untouched.

"Well, here's luck!" said Doctor Ling, raising the tumbler to his lips—which, however, it never touched. For Larry Henniker had firmly, but gently, grasped his wrist in a vise-like grip.

"Pardon me," said he. "That's mine."

The doctor's expression changed. His eyes blinked behind his round gold-rimmed spectacles; his parchment-like complexion changed to an unhealthy hue of green.

"I do not understand—" he faltered.

"Then I do," said Larry. "I like the look of that drink, and as I'm a guest in your house, you'll kindly oblige."

Taken completely by surprise, and realizing that it would be useless to attempt to resist, the doctor allowed Larry to take the tumbler out of his hand, and like a man in a daze accepted the glass that Dale had set down on the table.

"Now then, Doctor," Larry growled between clenched teeth. "The best of health to you! And no heel-taps, mind!"

Ling's glass fell from his hand, struck the corner of the writing-desk and broke into fragments; but before it had reached the carpet, he had barked, rather than shouted, a single word in Chinese, his right hand had gone to the hip-pocket of his trousers, and he had whipped out an automatic.

As Larry, for the second time, seized his wrist, the curtains at the far end of the room, to the left of the door were violently wrenched aside—and there stood four men, all dressed in black, each of whom held a revolver, directing the barrel straight at Larry Henniker's head.

THE "celebrated Doctor Ling" was as quick on his feet as a cat, but not too quick for Larry. As he sprang back, to

get his distance, Larry's long arm shot out and jerked him back like a hooked fish. And a moment after, the gun was wrenched out of the doctor's hand.

The four black-coated men were about to move forward to rescue their master, when Larry, who was holding the impotently struggling Ling in front of him like a shield, shouted at the top of his voice.

"Keep your distance," he cried. "If you fire, you'll hit this little rat, and if you come any closer I'll save you the trouble!"

Whether or not they could understand English, they could scarcely fail to see what he meant; for with his right hand he held the doctor in front of him by the scruff of the neck, while his left hand pressed the barrel of the automatic between the terrified man's shoulder-blades.

"I see you get me!" he growled, as the four Chinese drew slowly back. "If you start a rough-house, you'll have a dead man for a master. Dale, try the window!"

Quite suddenly Ling ceased his futile efforts to struggle free, and spoke in a quivering voice like that of a man on the verge of tears.

"There is some mistake," he choked. "You have misunderstood. Give me a moment to explain!"

"I've explained most things for myself," Larry retorted. "That drink was doped, and I saw you do it. In fact, I thought of a lot of things on the spur of the moment. You and General Kwo hold slightly different political views, and the only message you'd ever be likely to get from him is a *bullet doux* of lead in a nickel-plated envelope. We may have told you something tonight that we ought to have kept to ourselves till tomorrow morning, but we're not such fools as you thought."

The door being guarded by the four men who had emerged from behind the hangings, Dale in the meantime had made for the only window, from which he had drawn aside the curtains.

"Is the road clear?" Larry asked, with Ling's automatic now on the doctor's shoul-

der and directed at the four men by the door.

Dale never answered, but flung open the window and vaulted over the sill. And the moment he had done so, Larry heard an oath, a quick grunt, the shuffling of feet on the cinder-strewn drive, and then the crack of a fist on the point of a man's chin and the thud of a body falling limp to the ground.

Larry guessed what had happened. The moment the curtains had been drawn he had seen the flare of the head-lights of the car which was still standing outside the front door, and he knew that Dale had tumbled into the chauffeur's.

He had very little doubt in his mind which way the cat had jumped: a stiff collar and shirt would not interfere with Dale being able to use his fists. All the same he felt he would like to know for certain, before he maneuvered the doctor across the room and placed his back to the window.

"O. K.?" he cried.

"Right as rain," Dale answered. "I've put him to sleep by the look of it. I'll get the car started, Larry, and you might thank the doctor for lending it."

CROUCHING, still holding the miserable little man in front of him, so that not one of the watching hesitating Chinese dared fire, Larry moved cautiously toward the window.

Up to now, Ling, it appeared, had been too terrified to resist, even to speak, except for a feeble effort at protestation. But now that it looked as if his would-be victims were about to make good their escape, and probably realizing for the first time the consequences of what he had done, he became suddenly desperate and cast discretion to the winds.

He gave a quick breathless order to his four men in Chinese, hoping that Larry would not understand till it was too late to save the situation.

"The front door," he cried. "The front

door, you fools! If you don't watch it, they'll get away in the car."

Just then, in a kind of disgusted fury, Larry seized the little Chinese doctor by the throat and hurled him so violently across the room that, spinning like a top, he fell and struck his head against a corner of the desk, while Larry with a flying leap went out of the window. He landed on his feet on the cinders in front of the streaming headlights of the car. Rushing forward, he stumbled over the prone body of the chauffeur, who was lying where Dale had knocked him out, and all but lost his balance and fell.

"Come on!" cried Dale, who was at the steering-wheel and who had already got the engine ticking over. "Good boy, Larry!"

The near-side door to the driver's seat was standing open, and as Larry set a foot on the running-board, the front door was thrown open, a shot rang out, and the bullet, which must have missed Larry's head by the fraction of an inch, smashed the glass of the door into fragments.

A second later, he was seated beside Dale, and the car was moving down the drive. As they swung round the bend, another bullet came through the broken window and smashed the speedometer dial in the dash-board, while yet a third ripped open the top of the hood.

"Nice friendly little party!" Larry remarked, as he sat hunched with his head between his knees like a frog. "I didn't think such a mighty lot of the doctor's night-cap, did you?"

Dale never answered until he had turned the car into the main road and was heading for Shanghai at a good seventy miles an hour.

"Do you know, Larry," he said, "that little worm has got his knife into more important people than us. He must know about General Kwo and the so-called Son of Heaven still on this wicked earth; and it may be he has got his eye on those rubies. But, tell me how was he going to have the cheek to poison us, and imagine

for a moment he could get away with it? We're a pair of celebrities, my lad. There'd be the hell's own hue and cry, if we suddenly vanished."

Larry thought for a moment before he offered the only feasible explanation.

"It was just lullaby stuff, as like as not," said he. "Once he'd put us to sleep, he was going to tuck us up nice and comfy in bed. In the morning he could put it all down to the old Napoleon brandy being a lot too much for our weak little heads. All the little crook had got to do was to keep us at that doll's house of his till after ten in the morning. The general would have taken it for granted that there was nothing doing, so far as we are concerned, and started looking around for someone else to take on the job."

"Even if he sent his man to the hotel and found out that we weren't there?" Dale asked.

That puzzled Larry for a moment. Then the whole thing suddenly came to him as in a flash.

"Got it!" he exclaimed. "Wong! Gosh, it's a sure thing! Your gentleman's gentleman, Dale, who speak not velly much English and whom you wanted to take back to the States! Ling must keep the man there to find out what he can, and he's struck oil this time, and no mistake."

They were then entering the outskirts of Shanghai, and Dale slowed down to a crawl.

"We must see the general at once, Larry," he said, "but the trouble is we don't know where to find him."

"Somewhere near the south gate of the Chinese City, and if that pancake-faced Chink is still in the hotel, we can put the wind up him and make him take us there. We've got this car and we may as well use it. Looks as if you and I, my lad, are going to start a revolution!"

A FEW minutes later Dale had brought the car to a standstill before the darkened portico of the Nestor House Hotel. The door was open, and a light was burning

in the hall, where the night porter woke up with a start, shuffled away to get them their keys, and almost immediately fell fast asleep again.

Entering their suite, they switched on the light. Both bedrooms had been tidied up since they had dressed for dinner. The bed-clothes had been turned back, and their pajamas laid out on the counterpanes.

They were taking no chances. Arming themselves with a couple of automatics, they rang the bell, and then stationed themselves on either side of the door. When the circular Mr. Wong cautiously entered the room, they culled him like a seedling nettle, asking no questions, not even giving him time to gasp.

Searching his pockets, they found nothing—not even a copper-cash.

Holding his gun before the man's blinking eyes, Larry opened the prosecution.

"Listen here," he began. "We're going to take you to the house where we'll find Gen-



eral Kwo. If you won't take us there, we'll have to wait till tomorrow morning when we'll put you in charge of a certain Captain Quang. If you don't know who he is, I'll tell you. He is one of the general's staff officers, and you can guess what he'll do with you when he hears that you have been spying on us."

"No savvy," said Wong, though he was trembling like a stranded jelly-fish, and they had no doubt whatever of his guilt.

"I happen to know better. You understand English as well as we do. Tell us where the general is to be found, and I promise you we won't give you away.

Otherwise we keep you locked up here till tomorrow morning."

"No savvy."

The man repeated the words like a parrot, though there was a tremor in his voice.

Larry Henniker clenched his teeth.

"If you say 'No savvy' again, by heck, I'll bash you one that will knock a hole clean through that flat face of yours. Come on, Dale, we'll take him down to the car. He'll change his tune in a moment. We can find our own way to the south gate of the City."

As he was speaking, Larry grabbed the man by the scruff of the neck while Dale switched off the lights and shut the door. In the hall the porter was still sound asleep; and once they were all three in the car, Larry indulged in a little third degree by gripping Wong by tightening his hold on the fat man's neck as if he meant to break it.

"Now, which is it to be?" he asked. "Tonight or tomorrow morning?"

The victim gave an audible groan, submitting to a harsh and immutable fate.

"Allight!" he muttered. "I show you the general's house. But you plomise him no see me?"

"That's agreed," Dale laughed. "I can quite see your point of view: if we were to hand you over to him, you'd get all you deserve. But if you show us where General Kwo lives, we'll neither give you away nor let you out of our sight."

CROSSING the International Concession, they approached the ancient walls of the native city; whereupon the astute Mr. Wong began to evince very palpable signs of nervousness.

"More better you stop here, I think," he said, leaning forward and tapping Dale on a shoulder.

"Why?"

"Because house not far away now. More better them not hear motor car. Savvy?"

Dale used his brakes, and then shut off the engine.

"Where is it?" he asked.

They could see nothing but a low wall, beyond which there was evidently a large garden, for they could see several trees.

"Gate," said Wong, pointing up the road.

"I expect there's a janitor there," said Larry, getting out of the car. "I'll go on alone. You had best stay here, Dale, and keep an eye on this slippery customer. We'd look pretty fair fools if it's the wrong house and he did a getaway with the car!"

Larry walked rapidly up the road until he came to an iron gate. He found this locked, though a bell tinkled feebly. There was probably a night watchman in the house, but Larry was in a hurry and also he had no wish to alarm the whole household. He wanted to see General Kwo alone. So he climbed to the top of the wall, dropped down on the other side and stealthily crossed a large ornamental rock garden where there were iron images of cranes, a dove-cote and twisted wisteria trees growing in earthenware pots—the pleasure grounds of an exceedingly wealthy man which looked fantastic in the moonlight. The house was a large two-storied building with a curved roof that projected above a balcony, where a lamp was burning over a red and gold dragon door. The building looked as ancient as it was solid, and in former times had probably been the official residence of the city taotai.

As Larry cautiously approached the balcony, he could see that there was a huge knocker on the dragon door, though he did not want to use this, if he could find the night-watchman and make himself understood.

Taking the steps that led to the balcony three at a time, though still on tip-toe, at the top he caught his foot on something soft, stumbled—and nearly pitched head first against the door.

Recovering his balance, he turned and looked down—to see, to his utmost horror and amazement, the motionless body of a man who lay there upon his face, with arms outstretched, in a spreading pool of blood.

Going down upon a knee, he assured himself at once that the man was dead, and moreover that he had been killed only a few seconds before. He was evidently an armed guard who had been doing duty as a night-watchman, for a sheathed sword was at his side.

Listening, Larry could hear nothing; he could see nothing in the garden, but the foolish-looking cranes and the wisteria trees.

For a moment he was struck by the extraordinary incongruity of the situation. Here was he in dress clothes that he loathed wearing, in a strange garden in China where his only companion was a murdered man. For there was no doubt murder had been done, perhaps after he himself had entered the garden, and it was therefore probable that the murderers were still somewhere about, probably in the house.

He moved on tip-toe along the balcony. Upon two windows on his left the shutters were closed, but the third window he came to had been broken open. The shutters had been forced apart, a glass pane removed, and the window opened.

Larry crouched at the sill and listened. He could still hear nothing. The room beyond was too dark for him to see what was there, though the light of the moon was reflected upon a circular object that might have been a large bronze gong suspended upon a blackwood frame. Lightly and swiftly he swung himself over the window-sill, with his loaded gun in his right hand and the safety-catch released.

A shadow came at him out of the darkness, so rapidly and so silently that it might have been a gigantic cat. Larry fired, but his hand was struck aside as he did so, and the bullet smashed into the gong.

The crack of the shot was sharp and sudden, but the gong carried on a long, deep and reverberating note, whilst Larry found himself on the floor, struggling in the arms of a man who was as strong as he was. They had grasped each other by the wrists, each knowing that it was as

much as his life was worth to let go, for the one held a gun and the other a knife.

The young American with his legs twisted round his adversary was using all his strength and weight to get the superior position. Once he had the man on his back he felt that he would be able to wrench his right hand free.

SUDDENLY, in a strained breathless voice, the man let out some guttural Chinese words that might have been oaths, and to Larry's alarm he heard an answering voice that came from the other end of the room. So there were two to one against him; and if a light were shown, even if a match were struck, it would be all up with him in next to no time.

That prospect gave him the extra strength he needed. Though at that moment his adversary was half on top of him, he heaved his weight upward with a jerk, twisted his body around and wrenched himself free.

A knife gleamed in the moonlight as he sprang quickly backward; and then he fired again at random into the darkness, as a door was opened at the head of a flight of stairs at the far end of the room and a light appeared above a curtain that was hanging across the steps.

This light—though faint, because it was some distance away and still half shut out by the curtain—illuminated the room sufficiently to disclose certain objects: the framed gong against the wall facing the window, the vague outlines of inscribed tablets, several cheap clocks upon a shelf between porcelain vases, and a writing-desk inlaid with mother-of-pearl in the corner immediately opposite the foot of the stairs.

Blinking to get his eyes accustomed to the light, Larry saw two shadowy figures dive for the cover afforded by the writing-desk. He got no more than a glimpse of them, for they were in the beam of light for only a second, but that glimpse was enough for him to recognize them: they were two of Ling's men, the black-coated Oriental

toughs who had tried to hold up him and Dale. It seemed as if they, after murdering the night-watchman, had broken into the house probably to put an end to the entire activities of General Kwo-fung-lo.

Larry waited, with his eyes fixed on the writing-desk that was full in the light that came from the stairs—a heavy carved desk with the little pieces of mother-of-pearl shining like so many watchful eyes. Though he was still out of breath, he was determined to fire again if he saw so much as an eyebrow.

Then a figure appeared at the foot of the stairs—the silhouetted figure of a man, wearing a long loose robe, who stood with his back to the light. In that garb, with his narrow shoulders and almost entirely bald head, "the Mussolini of China" looked like a Buddhist priest, in spite of the fact that he held a revolver in his hand.

And the moment he entered the room, a shadowy form leaped at him from behind the desk—a knife gleamed—the report of Kwo-fung-lo's revolver smote upon Larry's eardrums like the clapper of a bell—and the man pitched forward on his face, to lie prone and lifeless on the floor, with his head only a few inches away from the general's slippered feet.

The other man, armed only with a knife, and now realizing that it was all up with him, rushed for the open window and flung himself over the sill. Larry leveled his automatic, shouted "Hands up!" and then, seeing Dale suddenly appear on the outer balcony, sprang forward between General Kwo and the window.

"For God's sake, don't fire!" he cried. "Bring him in, Dale," he went on. "Just as well I saw you coming, or I'd have hit you, sure. But why the hell are you here? The general and I were getting along very well without you."

AS THEIR prisoner was roughly bundled through the broken window, several serving-men came rushing into the room, and the general ordered a light.

"Did you leave Wong in the car?" Larry

asked Dale in a whisper, lest the general should hear.

The other nodded. "When I heard firing, you didn't expect me to stay out of it, did you?" he inquired mildly.

"He'll have done a getaway by now," Larry remarked, "but what does that matter? The man we want is Ling."

Two candles were lit on the writing-desk, and when the flames had burned up, there was a sudden silence that was almost ludicrous. Everyone was staring at everyone else, as if they found it hard to believe that they were not dreaming: a Chinese general in his sleeping-robe, with his bare feet in slippers; a big heavily-jowled Chinese, dressed in a short black coat, who already had his hands bound behind his back; two youthful Americans, the one immaculate in evening clothes, the other with his hair all ruffled and his shirt crumpled, and—to round off this pleasant little surprise party—a dead man on the floor!

It was General Kwo who was the first to speak; and the observation he made in his pedantic courteous tones was the next thing to bathos—for it was not meant to be humorous.

"Mr. Dahl and Mr. Henniker!" he exclaimed. "This is certainly most unexpected!"

Larry pointed first at the prisoner, and then at the body of the man on the floor, who was similarly dressed—that is to say, in the livery of the celebrated Doctor Ling.

"I suppose, you know what this means?" he asked.

"I have an idea," the general smiled. "The learned and distinguished Doctor Ling and myself are not the best of friends. At the same time I have not the remotest idea how this can have happened. This is my Shanghai house, but I am seldom here. If Ling has discovered the reason why I am now in this city, it is a calamity, and cannot be regarded as anything else."

As briefly as he could Larry described all that had happened that evening.

When he had finished his story, the general bowed. With his bare scraggy neck,

he looked very old—only his eyes were intensely alive.

"I am greatly in your debt," he said. "I must think what is best to be done. One thing is clear; we must take steps without a moment's delay. I presume you are both prepared to help me all you can?"

"You may," said Dale, without a second's hesitation. "We are in this business to the finish."

Kwo-fung-lo smiled.

"Gentlemen," said he, "the life of the hereditary and living Son of Heaven is imperiled. Doctor Ling has escaped. Con-



sider what that means! He will waste no time; he will procure an airplane, and he will fly to the frontier of Tibet. And once there, he will not only murder the Emperor, he will steal the Ming rubies. Realized in the markets of London, Paris and New York, those rubies are worth more than a king's ransom. They would provide funds with which to maintain the Emperor's troops. And now you realize what I mean when I say that no greater disaster could have happened."

"We understand that all right," said Larry. "But what do you want us to do?"

"We must fly to the monastery at once, so as to get there before Ling, who may take time to collect a small party of troops. It is a long way to the other side of China, but I must ask you to take me there."

"In the *Albatross*, do you mean?" said Dale. "She ought to be overhauled. We'd

got a choked oil pipe when we landed here. We intended to have the whole engine down."

"There is no time for that," the general replied. "You must do these repairs as quickly as you can, so as to be ready to start as soon as possible. You understand the vital necessity for haste. Doctor Ling will act at once. His one and only idea will be to get there before we do."

Dale turned to Larry.

"You can fix that oil pipe," said he. "It won't take long to get her right for a hop across China; and while you're at work on the bus, I'll run down to the hotel for a change of clothes for us both. I take it, the general will see to the food?"

"Certainly," said Kwo, bowing as usual. "I will come down to the aerodrome with you now, and then on to the hotel with Mr. Dahl."

IT WAS broad daylight when they turned into the gate of the aerodrome. Not a soul was about at that hour of the morning. The great corrugated-iron buildings looked like so many stranded monsters, whilst two or three light machines that lay around them out in the open might have been so many drowsy birds of prey that had gorged themselves to repletion.

The car drew up at the back of the hangar, and Dale and Larry got out and walked round to the front, where they expected to find the Chinese policeman who had been posted there on duty.

There was no sign of the man to be seen; and what made it even more probable that something serious might have happened was the fact that the door of the hangar stood open.

"Why, it has been broken into!" Larry exclaimed, rushing forward, with Dale close at his heels.

One side of the great double doors stood ajar, and one glance was enough to tell them that the padlock had been forced. And the moment they entered, there was the policeman lying on the ground, not only

insensible and with an ugly scar on his forehead, but also gagged and bound.

The two Americans stood looking at each other, and then they looked at the *Albatross*; and for a moment, though neither uttered a word, they were conscious of the same emotion: a desire for revenge, a feeling of almost uncontrollable animosity toward the ubiquitous and insidious little doctor with his Occidental diplomas and Oriental ideas.

For Dale Dahl had seen what had happened to his priceless monoplane, the thing he treasured more than anything else in the world; and just then he was seeing red. Inarticulate with rage and with both fists tightly clenched, he suddenly came out with a string of oaths that surprised even Larry.

As for Larry himself, being of a more practical disposition, and not so personally affronted, he reacted in an entirely different manner.

"In a place like this," he remarked, "that will be the better part of a week's job. This looks like rotten luck for the Emperor."

But Kwo-fung-lo was not a man who accepted defeat. As he explained to them, there was nothing for it but to make the best of a bad business.

They reported the matter to the police, though naturally they could not breathe a word of their suspicions as to who the actual criminal was; and then the two Americans returned to their hotel, after the general had left them, telling them that he would send for them when he wanted them—which would probably not be till late the following day. He had to telephone to his headquarters at Kau-ting-fu for one of his own airplanes, and he also wanted time to make certain inquiries.

Not only the local newspapers, but the world's news-agencies got hold of the outrage, and all of them made the most of it without getting anywhere near the truth. Needless to add, the astute Mr. Wong had vanished from off the earth.

THE following morning, the general sent to the hotel the man he had mentioned before, a sturdy little staff officer of the name of Captain Quang, who spoke English almost as well as his chief. He told them that as soon as the general could get a plane from Kau, they were to leave without delay. He had discovered that there was a possible landing-ground on a plateau to the north of the monastery. Also, it had transpired, Doctor Ling had hastened to Peking by airplane, where he would lose no time in enlisting the help of the government who would be as anxious to lay hands upon the Emperor as the priceless Ming rubies that would swell the treasury funds.

Hence it looked as if the business had resolved itself into a race with time. General Kwo could not continue to govern the central provinces, and an important secret society that had existed for four hundred years would be dissolved, if Ling reached the monastery first.

"And are you coming with us?" Dale asked the little captain.

Captain Quang nodded, rather after the manner of a mechanical toy.

"There will be four of us," he said. "You two gentlemen; his Excellency, the General, and my humble self."

"Only four! Is that enough to burst our way into a Tibetan monastery?"

"Certainly. There is no reason why the head priest should not hand over his charge, the moment we tell him that the Empire is about to be proclaimed. And in any case these lamas are craven folk, and they are not armed. I do not know the general's plans, but I believe he intends to disguise himself as a beggar in order to gain admittance. Once we are inside, the rest will be easy."

Dale glanced at Larry, and shrugged.

"Looks like baby-snatching," he observed. "Seems we're going to set fire to all China for the sake of a couple of kids!"

"And a string of rubies," added Larry. "That's the kind of thing that talks."

Captain Quang slowly shook his head. "There will be no fire," he said. "Only a little smoke, perhaps. Once we have the Emperor safe within the walls of Kauting-fu, our advance to Peking will be one triumphal march. Printed proclamations will have prepared the way for us. The people will welcome the return of the Mings."

"Well," said Dale, "we are at your service. You can tell the general that."

The captain bowed and left them.

GENERAL KWO, accompanied by Quang, had them up before sunrise, and all four drove out to the aerodrome: There Dale took the machine up and played about for a while, to test the plane's tendencies when stalling, for rudder, aileron and elevator control. Satisfied with this, he came to ground, picked up his passengers, and they set forth upon their journey.

Up the broad estuary of the Yang-tse to the upper reaches of the great river; over Ichang, the most inland treaty port, at the foot of the famous gorges, and then the opium city of Chungking, a jumbled wilderness of roofs packed between tree-clad hills.

As the afternoon advanced, they crossed the southern province of Si-Chuan, until they sighted the frontier mountains in the distance; and then, late in the afternoon, they planed down upon the grassland plateau a few miles to the north of the monastery.

Leaving the airplane in a place where there did not appear to be a human habitation within a hundred miles, the four of them set forth together in the growing dusk, after the general had thrown over his uniform the ragged cloak of a pilgrim.

It was a walk that was half a climb, since their route lay across valleys and watersheds, and they had nothing to guide them but the sinking sun. Darkness overtook them before they were half way upon their journey, and after that they made even slower progress than before.

When they came at last within sight of

their destination, the moon, high in the sky, cast its white light upon the tall and silent walls that crowned a steep and solitary hill, upon the slopes of which they found an ascending footpath where steps had been cut in the rock.

As they drew nearer the great building, it appeared more and more impressive; the walls in places standing on the very brink of a precipice, with here and there a curved tiled roof projecting, so that the whole edifice had an aspect of top-heaviness, as if at any moment it might crash like an avalanche. There were no lights anywhere, and the silence was so great that it might all have been a dream.

As they approached the arched gateway, Kwo-fung-lo whispered to his three companions, telling them to hide behind a rock and there wait with their revolvers ready till he called them.

"There will be no need to fire," said he. "We must not alarm the brethren. My business is with the head lama alone."

He went up to the great wooden gate, groped in the darkness under the archway, and at last found a knocker with which he banged lightly.

A minute elapsed—two minutes, or even more—and then a small barred wicket was very cautiously opened, through which Dale and Larry saw a dim light before it was obscured by the shadow of a human head.

Words were exchanged in low whispering voices. And then they heard the jangle of keys; a narrow door was opened, and the general disappeared.

DALE and Larry remained where they were, until the slim figure of Kwo-fung-lo again darkened the illumined doorway. He had the janitor's keys in his left hand, his revolver in his right.

"You may come in," he said. "Our little argument is ended."

Advancing, they found themselves inside a double gateway. There were steps to the right, leading to the door of a gatehouse. A bronze lantern was suspended overhead. The janitor, an old shaven

wrinkled man, leaned against one of the walls, his toothless mouth wide gaping, the skinny fingers of one hand nervously plucking at a jade necklace around his neck as if it interfered with his breathing.

Kwo nodded in his direction.

"We shall have no more trouble with him," he said. "He seems surprised to see us."

As he said this, he threw off the long threadbare robe he had been wearing, and appeared before the astonished man in his uniform and medals.

"So you see who I am," he smiled. "I do not expect you to know much about what is happening in your country, but with the name of Kwo-fung-lo you may not be unfamiliar."

He walked to the inner gate, tried several keys in the lock before he found the right one, and when he had opened it, told his three companions to go first, the janitor to follow.

They entered an open courtyard where the moonlight gleamed. Both to the right and left were buildings that stood against the outer wall, one-storied devil-temples with devil-drums and great brass trumpets upon swivels on either side of every door. Immediately in front of them was a building that was evidently the holy of holies, the Temple of Righteous Harmony itself, for soapstone lamps were burning suspended from the eaves that overhung the terrace, and these illumined a carved gilded door.

To their left, reaching even higher than the fortress-like outer wall, was what might have been a huge barrack, story above story, tier above tier of narrow slit-like windows: obviously the quarters of the monks—an Oriental ecclesiastical rabbit-warren that might have been a prison.

General Kwo ordered the janitor to take them to the rooms occupied by the head lama himself; and with a sigh and a shrug the old man obeyed, leading them through a door into the barrack-like building, up a flight of stone steps, and thence through

some curtains into an ante-room where an oil lamp was burning.

Thrusting the old fellow aside, and telling his companions to follow, Kwo crossed the threshold, revolver in hand.

There was not a breath of air in the room they now entered; for the only window was curtained, and two lamps burned upon a shrine whereon were a golden image of the Buddha, a brass incense-burner and a cheap mahogany clock. Upon a quilted bed a man sat staring, his bare feet upon



the floor. He was an old man, fat and hairless, his turnip-shaped skull shining in the lamplight. Little beads of perspiration had settled in the creases in his neck and glistened, too, upon the short-fingered, shapeless hands that gripped his knees.

He sat looking from the general to the two strangers, and then back again, as if unable to speak.

Bowing, Kwo-fung-lo assured the reverend man that he had nothing whatever to fear. They were come, he said, upon a mission that would make the monastery famed throughout the length and breadth of China, to take away with them that very night the living descendant of the Mings, to be crowned the Son of Heaven in Peking, where he might offer a sacrifice to the glorious memory of his ancestors under the dome of the Temple of Heaven.

It was as if the effect of the words were electrical. The head priest staggered as if he had been struck, and then he flopped into a sitting position on the edge of the bed, where he sat limp with his hands fallen between his knees.

They stood staring at him, even Kwo unable to understand what he could have

said so to have stunned the man. And while they waited for him to recover and explain, their ears were suddenly deafened by an unholy noise that was like pandemonium, the baying of the hounds of hell let loose; ear-splitting, reverberating, continuous, it arose from the courtyards around the temple like the bursting of a dam.

THE general's countenance, so far as his features were capable of expressing any emotion, underwent a surprising transformation. When the head priest had so unaccountably collapsed at a proposal that was all to his advantage, Kwo's thin lips had parted in astonishment; but now, when their ears were deafened by the pandemonium outside, a look of the most indescribable fury contorted every feature of his face. His little eyes burning like embers, he flew at the man who sat upon the bed and caught him by the throat.

With an oath he hurled him to the floor, though the fat lama must have been nearly twice his weight; and then, whipping round like a ferret, he spoke in English.

"Quick!" he cried. "If this scoundrel will not help us, we must find the Emperor for ourselves."

Followed by the others, he dashed across the ante-room, tore aside the curtains, and racing along the corridor and down the stairs, entered the courtyard, where he pulled up out of breath.

They were now tortured by a noise that seemed to be in their very eardrums. The moonlight flooded the center of the court, but the great temple at the head of the steps and the smaller devil-temples that both faced and flanked it cast their shadows on the paving stones that were intergrown with weeds; and in this outer rim of semi-darkness they could see black shapes moving rapidly here and there, like the forms of skulking wolves.

Dale and Larry could see for themselves what had happened, though they could not explain it. The devil-drums and trumpets, the superstitious clatrap that the corrupted

devotees of the great Lord Guatama had borrowed from the Taoists, were blasting forth their hideous uproar to scare away the evil spirits that had invaded the sacred precincts.

"We have to thank the old gatekeeper for this!" Kwo-fung-lo exclaimed, as he grasped Larry by an arm. He was obliged to shout at the top of his voice to make himself heard.

"See that blank wall opposite?" he went on. "Fire into that! Hit no one—that would be fatal to our plans. They can be frightened away like jackals."

All four fired together, the sharp reports of their firearms cutting through the blast of the trumpets and the deeper roll of the drums.

The turmoil ceased quite suddenly; but, before the echoes had died away, the general had vanished, diving into the shadows under a wall—to reappear in a moment, dragging with him a reluctant struggling boy, a squealing acolyte dressed in a long lama robe.

Holding his hostage by the scruff of the neck, and ordering the others to follow close upon his heels, he dashed across the courtyard, toward the broad steps leading to the great central temple where the soapstone lanterns were burning on the terrace.

Passing through the wide painted door which stood ajar, they entered the temple itself. Inside there was no living soul to be seen. After the bright moonlight in the courtyard a few seconds elapsed before their eyes were accustomed to the semi-darkness.

"What are we here for?" Larry asked—and there was something in the atmosphere of the place that made him speak in a whisper.

"To find the Emperor," Kwo replied. "This boy will show us the way to the royal apartments. He has already told me they are somewhere here—upstairs, behind the Buddha."

It was as if they stood in the dim religious atmosphere of the nave of a cathedral. Bronze hanging lanterns projected from the walls. To their left a narrow

transept door stood open, evidently connecting with the barrack like quarters of the monks. Under a tiled roof, above a balcony or gallery that extended over all four walls, at the far end of the temple, arose a gigantic image of the Buddha, towering majestically to the very rafters—the Lord Guatama, the reigning Presence of that holy place, an idol near forty feet in height, though seated cross-legged on a plinth.

IN THIS direction the general pointed, as he moved forward across the temple floor. Leaving the transept door to their left, they passed behind the image, and thence began to ascend an iron spiral staircase that led to the gallery above.

At the top, which was but level with the idol's shoulders, he turned and spoke in a whisper to his two companions. Upon the balcony were two doors, one to the right, the other to the left, both leading apparently to some other building that adjoined the temple at the back.

"The royal apartments are beyond," he said. "Rooms that have been occupied by the Dalai Lama himself. Do not approach the presence of the Son of Heaven until you have permission."

He exchanged a few words in Chinese with the acolyte and then ordered the boy away.

"The three of you come with me," he went on. "But keep your distance. It will take time to make him understand that he is to be proclaimed Emperor, that the Middle Kingdom is about to be restored. His Imperial Majesty will not have seen a foreigner before, and therefore I must explain who you are and why you are with me."

As he spoke, he turned to the right, passed through the door in that corner of the balcony and, followed by his three companions, entered a narrow corridor.

They had not gone far before they saw a light that streamed from an open door upon the left. Standing on the threshold, Dale and Larry got a glimpse, through an

outer room, of what might have been a chamber in the palace of Kublai Khan. They beheld priceless silken tapestries that Prince Ming-lu-kwong himself had brought with him from the sacked Forbidden City four hundred years ago; carved and gilded furniture, great thin-necked vases of satsuma, paintings upon rice-paper, a yellow carpet with a design of blue dragons and purple flying storks, even a modest reproduction of the Imperial Dragon Throne.

In this inner room, which was brilliantly illuminated, were four people, one only of whom the Americans had seen before.

The fat head priest, perspiring, stood under a lantern suspended from the ceiling. Gesticulating with both hands, he was talking excitedly to a Chinese boy and girl who stood on either side of him, and who looked as if they belonged to a bygone century.

The girl, by dint of her delicate oval face, her dreamy sloe-like eyes, the richly embroidered clothes that she was wearing—a short jacket of many colors and wide trousers above her squeezed senseless feet that were shod in golden shoes—was the center of this fantastic Oriental picture, framed by the jambs and lintel of the door. She could not have been more than fourteen years of age. She was like something very precious, very fragile; a priceless piece of animated porcelain.

The boy, a year or so her elder, was of coarser fiber, more robust. Though well enough looking, his skin was darker, less transparent, and his features lacked the same sensitive refinement. He wore a long queue, and around his waist was the yellow sash that denoted his Imperial descent, whilst from his neck depended a string of gigantic rubies, smooth round gems like great purple grapes that glittered in the light. Without doubt Kwo-fung-lo had spoken no more than the truth, when he had told of the worth of those jewels.

Behind these two and the gesticulating priest, a woman stood, not old, yet wrinkled, her oiled coal-black hair bound tightly round her head. With her brown hands clasped together, she stood listening

attentively to what the head lama was saying, upon her face an expression of mingled astonishment and consternation.

KWO-FUNG-LO muttered under his breath.

"He means to take them away, to save them from us," he said. "There must be some reason for that, and yet I cannot understand it. Cannot the fool realize that, if the Empire is restored, he and his monastery are famed for centuries!"

"Who's the old dame?" Harry asked.

"A nurse. I've heard of her often. It is her privilege to have weaned the celestial Son of Heaven, and thus she has acquired merit, as we say. I have been told she never leaves him, but waits day and night upon his very slightest wishes."

"Where does the priest want to take them?" Dale asked. "Can you hear what he's saying?"

"Yes. The scoundrel is trying to persuade them to leave the monastery at once by a postern gate in the outer wall, somewhere at the back of this building. I can think of no reason for this, unless it is that he wants the rubies. But wait here for me, I am going to find out the truth. Do not show yourselves, until I tell you you may enter."

Bowing repeatedly, his hands clasped before him, he moved forward, through the first room into the second.

First, he spoke in a deferential voice to the two staring children, who had drawn closer together as if afraid. Then, suddenly and savagely, he turned upon the fat head lama, so raising his voice that the man retreated a step as if he had been threatened with a blow.

Quang, who was standing behind the two Americans, laughed and spoke in English.

"We will hear no more from that fat pig," he said. "He is more afraid of the general than of Yen Wang, the devil-god."

As he spoke, Kwo-fung-lo turned again to the boy, dropped down upon his knees and touched the carpet with his forehead, and then proclaimed the frightened and

bewildered lad the reigning Son of Heaven, the rightful heir to the Dragon Throne of China that had served his ancestors, the mighty Mings.

As he did so, the old woman suddenly burst into tears, hiding her face in her hands, as if she was afraid. But in that brief moment something else took place—and too rapidly for the three onlookers to intervene. And besides, they were looking at the Emperor, the astonished boy who was gazing down at the bald head of the man who prostrated himself at his feet.

Unnoticed, the head priest took in a deep breath. His lips moved convulsively, as he seized one of the great porcelain vases by its slender neck, swung it over his head, and brought it down with a crash and all his force upon the uncovered head of the man who kow-towed upon the floor.

As the vase smashed into fragments, General Kwo-fung-lo pitched forward on his face—to lie prone on the yellow carpet that was splashed with a spurt of blood.

Dale, quicker off the mark than either Larry or Quang, sprang into the outer room; but he had not taken two steps before the fat lama saw him coming, slammed the door of the inner room in his face, and locked it on the other side.

And as the door shut, Larry saw over Dale's shoulder another door open on the far side of the further room, and in that doorway he got a glimpse—and no more than a glimpse—of the diminutive and slender figure of "the celebrated Doctor Ling."

DALE DAHL hurled himself against the door. Wrenching at the handle, he threw all his weight against it, whilst he shouted to Larry and Quang.

"Lend a hand!" he cried. "The three of us may be able to break it open."

But try as they might, it was more than they could do. They charged until their shoulders were bruised; and then, giving it up as a bad job, they drew back, beaten and out of breath.

Then Larry spoke for the first time.

"Did you see Ling?" he asked.

"Ling!" Dale exclaimed. "Here?"

"Sure. He's in there with the Emperor. And here's Kwo senseless on the ground."

"Hell! What are we to do?"

"Listen," Quang intervened, in his clipped, almost comical English. "Let us keep our heads. There was a door on the other side of the inner room, the door through which Ling must have entered. That door must connect with another corridor on the other side of the balcony; and



you will remember that, when we got to the top of the staircase, there was another door to the left. We must go round to the other side. Perhaps we may be able to get in that way. At any rate we can see."

There was no need to answer; the man had spoken no more than common sense. Together they turned back into the corridor, and in a few seconds had gained the temple balcony. Half way across this, Dale, who was leading, came to a sudden standstill immediately behind the head of the great Buddha. He had suddenly found himself confronted by the circular inverted soup-plate countenance of Mr. Wong—the imperturbable fat man in the Nestor House Hotel in Shanghai, who had combined the not so inconsistent duties of personal valet and political spy.

Dale's arm shot out to catch the man by the throat. But, ducking with surprising suddenness for a man of his rotundity of figure, Wong grasped the iron rail of the spiral staircase and went down the steps in bounds like an india-rubber ball.

Larry started to follow him, when he remembered that at that moment the lives

of both the Emperor and General Kwo-fung-lo were at the mercy of Doctor Ling.

"Look there!" cried Dale, pointing down at the floor of the temple, over the shoulder of the image.

Larry looked—and at once caught his breath. There were armed men, soldiers in uniform, at both doors, the main entrance and that in the transept. Nor was this the worst of it; from where they stood they could see across the courtyard, and there were men with fixed bayonets at the gateway of the temple.

For a moment not a word was said, and then it was Quang who spoke, as calm as before. It seemed that nothing could excite the imperturbable little soldier.

"The doctor has brought these men from Peking," he said. "They must have come here by airplane, and they were lucky to find somewhere where they could land in the dark. We are caught like rats, but even rats know how to fight."

There was a pause. Larry Henniker could feel his heart beating like a hammer. Captain Quang went on in the same emotionless expressionless voice.

"I will remain here," he said. "I will hide, but I do not think they will come up the stairs. If they do, I will send them back again. After I have shot them, they will break their necks on the stairs. You two must go straight to the Emperor and the general. There can not be a second to lose."

DALE and Larry never answered. There was neither time nor necessity for them to express the admiration they felt for the gallant little man. Passing through the door that stood open, they found themselves in a corridor, similar in all respects to that on the other side, and in a second or so they had gained the royal apartments.

Doctor Ling, who had evidently been expecting Wong to join him, had left the door only partially closed; and when Dale threw it open and burst into the room, Ling himself stood facing him, with one

hand grasping the Son of Heaven by the throat, whilst the other hand gripped the toy-like automatic with which he had tried to defend himself in the house in Shanghai.

The little Chinese doctor was dressed as immaculately as ever; yet the slit eyes gleamed dangerously behind the high cheekbones, and the blue thin-lipped mouth made him look like some venomous Oriental insect.

General Kwo still lay stretched upon the floor with his forehead smeared with blood. He had raised himself upon an elbow and was groping with a hand at the flap of his revolver holster, as if he had only just then recovered consciousness.

Ling was about to wrench the ruby necklace from the Emperor's neck when he suddenly caught sight of Dale and Larry. At once he changed his mind; he let the great rubies drop, raised his automatic, and as the two Americans advanced into the room, he fired; pointblank—into the chest that supported the blood-red glittering jewels.

The last of the Sons of Heaven dropped limp to the ground; but before he reached the floor there had come another deafening report, and the fraction of a second later Doctor Ling himself lay stretched stone dead upon the yellow carpet.

For General Kwo-fung-lo had fired from the floor, and his bullet had struck the man between the eyes.

THE whole thing had happened so suddenly—a double tragedy in a space of time that might have been the flash in a camera lens—that for a moment Larry and Dale could do nothing, but stand horror-stricken, amazed and mute spectators of how the different people in the room reacted in the crisis.

There could be no question of the death of Doctor Ling. The little form lay sprawled, supine, arms and legs extended, the red death mark in the very center of his forehead, a dandified horror.

The head priest was at once petrified and trembling. His eyes were stony, glazed,

and the fat upon his neck and many chins was trembling.

The little painted-porcelain girl had tottered, half fainting, to a corner of the room where she crouched with shoulders hunched, her face hidden in her hands.

As for General Kwo, with an effort he struggled to his feet, and stood swaying and staring down at the body of the Emperor; whilst the older woman went down upon her knees beside the body of the boy whom she had nursed, and filled the room with her shrill and penetrating voice.

"My son!" she wailed. "My son!"

On and on she went, repeating the same words over and over again, rocking dizzily from side to side, the tears streaming from between her brown bony fingers. A monotonous and maddening dirge. Even in the Orient grief never found more audible expression. Taking it for granted that he she loved was already dead, she proclaimed her sorrow in a voice that grated on their very souls.

"My son!" she cried. "My son!"

Larry whispered to Dale.

"Look at Kwo!" he said.

Passing a hand across his bruised and blood-stained head, the general slowly moved his eyes from the body of the Emperor, to fix them fiercely, even terribly, upon the kneeling weeping woman.

Then, tottering as if he were still half dazed, he moved toward the priest who was too horror-stricken to move. Indeed all his features might have been frozen, and his eyes were dim and yet staring, when General Kwo-fung-lo caught him by the throat.

"*The truth!*" he roared. "I'll have the truth out of you—or you also die, here and now!"

The lama choked. He was like a fat doe rabbit with a ferret at its throat.

When Kwo-fung-lo suddenly released him, he fell into a chair. And as soon as he had regained his breath, with a loaded revolver at his head, in a low and trembling voice he confessed to an outrageous and stupendous swindle.

The last real descendant of the Mings had died in infancy; and instead of breaking this all-important news to the Secret Society of Righteous Harmony, as he should have done, in his own interests he had wished to keep the tradition alive.

He had therefore imported a spurious Son of Heaven; and in order that the fraud might be the more easily kept secret, he had selected the child of a farmer's wife in the province of Yunnan. The woman had been smuggled into the monastery with her child to whom she was devoted; and although she was only an untutored peasant, she had had sense enough to realize that there were possibilities in the situation beyond the most fantastic of her dreams. Her son, whose forebears had toiled in the rice-fields, had been married to a daughter of the old mandarin class, and she lived in hopes that some political revolution would place him on the Dragon Throne, Emperor of all China.

But this was more than the head lama had ever bargained for. He was bold enough in his way when it was merely a matter of playing for profit, but to practice a base deception, defying all the ideals and traditions of the whole principle of ancestor-worship, was more than he dared do. To allow a peasant to ascend the sacred steps of the Temple of Heaven was unthinkable. He might deceive a secret society, but he could not deceive four hundred million people. In other words, on the arrival of the general with his friends, a situation had arisen when the game was not worth the candle; and for that reason he had wanted to escape from the monastery by a small gate at the back, taking with him his two charges, as well as the rubies. Later, he had hoped, the whole affair would blow over, and then he could return.

As General Kwo-fung-lo listened to this story, all the fierceness went out of his wizened face; his arms fell limp, his head dropped upon his chest, and it was as if before their eyes he became an old, old man.

The two Americans could not understand

exactly what had happened. They could only judge by what they saw—a man of iron resolution and indomitable courage, for whom they now had so great an admiration, crushed, broken, defeated, standing before them, with his bald bleeding forehead, wearing his ill-fitting uniform upon which his decorations glittered in the lamplight, the most pathetic figure in that room.

LARRY went up to him and placed a hand upon his shoulder—a demonstrative familiar action that no Chinese could either appreciate or understand. He had already examined the body of the so-called Emperor, and he had seen that the bullet had passed close to his lung, that the boy still lived, and there was a chance that he would recover.

"What is the matter?" he asked. "Tell me what has happened?"

In a broken, almost inaudible voice, General Kwo explained.

"All's not lost yet, General," Larry answered. "You may have lost an empire, but you have found the fortune you wanted, the money to pay your troops. Surely it is better to rule three provinces peacefully and justly than to plunge this country into another civil war?"

"What do you mean?"

"What I say. Those rubies are yours. Your ancestor gave them to the Mings who no longer exist. That boy has no right to them, on your own showing. They do not belong to this fat swindling priest. If they belong by right to any man, that man is you."

Dale was now bending down over the body of the "Emperor," and was feeling for a pulse.

"He's alive all right!" he exclaimed. "Come, Larry, lend a hand."

Together they gently lifted the boy and laid him down upon a couch. The woman was still weeping bitterly. The crouching frightened girl had not yet moved.

Larry again turned to the general.

"It may be as well for you to know, General," he said, "that there are armed

men in the temple. Doctor Ling did not come here alone. So far as we could see, every gate and door is guarded."

"Is that so?"

"Sure. But they evidently didn't hear the shots. Quang is stationed at the head of the staircase, and if they attempt to come up here, he'll give the alarm."

At that very moment three shots rang out, echoed like thunderclaps in the vastness of the temple nave. Quang had opened fire at the head of the spiral staircase.

Dale dashed out of the room; and as Larry followed him, he turned and spoke to the general.

"Tell that woman to shut up that row," he said. "There's no need for all this fuss. If they leave the boy where he is and don't try to move him, he'll probably recover."

A minute later they had joined Quang upon the balcony. Encouraged by the fat Mr. Wong who was waving them on from the rear, a party of soldiers were attempting to ascend the staircase, while others were firing upward from the temple floor.

Even single-handed the captain might have held them at bay; for, if he was one against many, he had the advantage of position. He was protected by the head and shoulders of the gigantic image—and although these rough republican soldiers were Taoists, they had no reverence for the Buddha. Also he held a defile, as his opponents could only advance up the stairs in single-file, whilst he picked them off one by one.

And the moment the two Americans arrived on the scene and began to blaze off over the balcony railings, the men below scattered like a flock of frightened geese, racing for the doors, jostling each other in their eagerness to make good their escape and leaving three or four of their comrades stretched on the temple floor.

"Come!" cried Dale. "Now's our chance to get away while the going's good. The general said something about a postern gate at the back. And what was good

enough for the Son of Heaven is good enough for us."

The three of them raced back to the room from which they had come, where they had left the general who had been too dazed to follow them.

They met him on the threshold.

"Is it all right?" he asked.

"Yes," said Dale. "They have cleared off, for the time being at any rate. Get the fat priest to show us the way to the gate at the back!"

LARRY HENNIKER brushed past them, into the room. There he went up to the still unconscious boy who was stretched upon the couch, bent down, and lifted the ruby necklace over his head.

General Kwo entered and spoke to the priest, ordering him to show them the way to the postern gate.

"Can we trust him?" Dale asked.

"Yes. It will be more than his life is worth to fool us, and he knows it."

Larry thrust the necklace into the general's hand.

"A family heirloom," said he. "You can now rule three provinces as the Mings once ruled all China. Surely that's enough for any man, and peace is better than war."

General Kwo-fung-lo actually smiled.

"It may be you are right," said he. "He who reaches for the stars is fortunate if he grasps within his hand one speck of comet-dust."

Larry laughed.

"I would not call three provinces of China a speck of comet-dust!" said he. "But we judge all things by comparison. Still, General, it is time we got a move on! At any moment they may come back again."

Led by the head lama, they went out of the room, passing straight on along the corridor, at the end of which they passed through a door at the head of a long flight of stone steps. This brought them into a little courtyard, where the priest unlocked a door in the outer wall. And one after the other they passed out into the silence of the night and the open air.

The moon had sunk low above the mountains. A cold wind blew around the hilltop, sighing under the great silent walls that towered above them.

It was the line of the outer wall they followed, advancing cautiously in single file, Dale leading the way.

They had to feel for every foothold in the darkness, for there were places where there was not a foot between the brink of the precipice and the bottom of the wall.

At last, however, they gained the comparatively level ground before the open gateway, where they could see the soldiers, one of whom held a torch.

Stealthily they worked their way to the top of the rock steps that led down the hillside; and it was not until they were over the crest and out of the light of the torch that they knew that they were safe.

It was long after daylight when they toiled wearily up to the plateau where they had left the airplane. For a long time no one had spoken a word, and it was not until they were in the air and speeding eastward that the general broke the silence.

"We have accomplished much," said he, "and I have much to thank you for. My government is now secure; there will be peace and prosperity in central China for many years to come; we have exposed an audacious fraud—and yet my heart is sad, because the Sons of Heaven are no more."





THE STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

C.C.C.

A FINE lot of letters have come in from C.C.C. camps; so fine that we are finding it hard to choose those which we can find room for in **SHORT STORIES**. We wish we could print more of them and want to thank all of you who are responding to our request for letters; don't think that because we can't print more, we don't like them. We do. Good luck to you and remember **SHORT STORIES** is paying \$5 for the letter printed in each issue which we judge the best, and \$2 each for any others we can use. Address the Editor of **SHORT STORIES**, Garden City, New York.

This letter wins the \$5.00 for this issue.

The Editor of **SHORT STORIES**,
Garden City, New York.

Bill was writing home. Red pitied him, section leader or not. 'Twas painful; sweat stood out on his brow; he chewed his tongue; he mussed his hair; he sighed and looked at Red for sympathy.

"Red, what'll I write home?"

"Gosh, I don't know, Bill. Tell her that you like your job, and everything's O. K. Tell her that the most incorrigible gold-bricker you have is Red, and that you feel obligated to recommend him for reprobation and discharge."

"Rats! You're the best worker I've got."

"Don't tell her that, or she'll think you're lying down on the job. Oh, Heck! it's your letter Bill, write it yourself and if she's like my mother she'll understand."

"What do I hear? Must be the wind."

"Guess so, look at those clouds! Looks like a windstorm."

"Get out there and tighten up those ropes men!" Bill shouted. The civies piled out

to tighten tent ropes. It looked bad. The wind was whipping tent flaps and ropes in a way boding no good to unprepared tents. Bill ran up and down the tent lines, warning the boys and ousting them with shouted commands. The boys worked swiftly. By the time Bill turned back to his tent, the wind had increased its fury to the extent that all hands were clinging to tent ropes and poles. Bill saw his tent raise, as the stakes pulled from the earth. He ran, yelling, "Hold 'er boys." He arrived in time to grab a rope as the tent started toward the zenith. Bill went for a ride, yelling like an Indian. He weighed 180 pounds and all of it was muscle, including his head. Wind and tide wait for no man. They carried Bill twenty feet through the air. When the tent turned inside out he dropped with it to the ground. He came out on top, swearing and waving hamlike fists at the elements.

Then it rained. Bill's clothes were exposed and he couldn't do a thing. Sergeant Elling demanded help with the other tents, and Bill turned reluctantly from his trunk, his bed and clothes.

Thirteen tents were blown down, or torn so badly that repairs were impossible. Bill wasn't the only man using indelicate language, and we slept in close quarters that night.

Bill was writing home.

"Red, what'll I say?"

"I dunno. You might tell her about the storm and what it did to your clothes."

"I couldn't do that, but here goes anyhow, Mom'll wonder why I don't write."

Bill wrote.

Red read.

Dear Mom,

Everything here is O. K. and I'm feeling fine. Think I'll enlist for another six months. We had a little storm today which

*The Rajah's jewels in the
ship's safe; her bows set
on a false course; her
first officer dead
on her decks!*



*All in our
next issue
SHORT STORIES
for
March 10th*

In the Middle Watch

Part I of a two part story by

ALBERT RICHARD WETJEN



Also—*The Major returns to his old stamping
ground among the I. D. B.'S—*

**THE "OYSTER'S" PEARL, a novelette by
L. PATRICK GREENE**

**A HOMER KING GORDON story of flying Hank
Osborne, "A Suicide Job"; HARRY SINCLAIR
DRAGO'S "A Wells-Fargo Man"; a G-Man story,
"Case Ten" by ROBERT H. ROHDE, etc., etc., etc.**

kept us in from work. Say, Mom, I need a couple of dollars to clean and press my suit, which I got muddy the other night. Hope you're O. K. Write soon.

Your loving Son
Bill.

Norman S. Frampton,
C.C.C. Co. 3511, S. P. 20,
Vandalia, Ohio

And the writers of these letters will receive \$2.00 each.

The Editor of SHORT STORIES,
Garden City, New York.

I have just finished reading your last issue of SHORT STORIES and was very much interested in the story C-Men by Frank Richardson Pierce; tell Frank to keep up the good work as his stories are greatly enjoyed by the boys at this camp, although as you probably know such experiences are far and few between for us fellows in the C.C.C. Our camp was one of the first camps established in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan and is located just six miles from the shores of Lake Superior and twenty-six miles from the city of Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, where is located our District Headquarters and the Army Post Fort Brady. In this part of the country our work out of doors consists mostly of tree planting in which there were 720,650 Jack Pine, 313,200 Norway Pine and 22,360 White Pine trees planted during the past planting season or altogether a total of 1,056,150 trees covering a total of 855 acres, also Stream Improvement the task of beautifying and improving the trout streams so as to make more and better fishing for the city bred angler who comes out in the open once a year to rough it in a luxurious camp trailer. Our work also consists of Truck Trail Construction which is better known at Road Building, and Hazard Reduction which means clearing the forest of brush and dead trees so as to reduce the amount of fires which spring up in the dry season. Of course we have quite a few of these fires but none quite so bad

as portrayed in Pierce's story "The Last Spark," but can readily understand how bad such a fire would be by comparing our own experiences with smaller fires of the same kind. So here's lots of luck to SHORT STORIES from a C.C.C. who likes nothing better than his issue, so let's have some more stories of the C.C.C.

A FAN

D. Garbet,
667 Co. C.C.C.,
Raco, Michigan

The Editor of SHORT STORIES,
Garden City, New York.

Stationed in a country that is honey-combed with many caves and caverns presents many opportunities for adventure. Some months ago these caverns played a humorous part in one of the four C.C.C. camps in the Mammoth Cave Area.

Sixty replacements arrived from Ohio to this company in Kentucky, and lacking something colorful to write home about, some of them decided to explore some of the minor caves, though orders were issued to the contrary. One Saturday about ten of the enrollees composed a party to explore all the caves in Cedar Sink, one of the picturesque valleys of the cave area. After an adventurous day among rocks and caves the boys returned for supper, and after the meal it was noticed that one of the lads was missing.

It was immediately reported to one of the officers, and a search party was formed by the lieutenant, one of the local men enrolled in camp being put at the head of the posse. The party reached the "sink" when it was quite dark, making the search dangerous among the rocks, cliffs and caves. The party succeeded in searching the entrance of every cave in the sink but no trace was found of the missing boy, so the party returned to camp two o'clock in the morning, planning to resume their search after breakfast.

The next morning the C. O. and the lieutenant were discussing the incident before preparations were made for the second

search when the medico inquired as to the name of the enrollee; upon hearing the name the medical officer revealed the fact to the much embarrassed officers that the man had been in the infirmary since the time he was reported missing.

Michael Koval

Headquarters 582 Co., N. P.-3,
C.C.C., Mammoth Cave,
Kentucky

The Editor of *SHORT STORIES*,
Garden City, New York.

Camped, as I have been, in the Puget Sound country of Washington for nine months, it was natural that I should hope to make a trip to Mt. Rainier. Late September found twelve of us there on a four-day excursion trip.

Beautiful Paradise Valley claimed us throughout the entire afternoon of our arrival. Then a good night's rest and a glorious morning sun roused any vitality and aggressiveness we might have been favored with. That mountain was made to be climbed. Breakfast over, Ed and I lent our farewells to the rest and started up.

A quarter-mile of trail brought us to a rounded knoll sloping sharply 600 feet to the icy bed of Nisqually Glacier. Here the view of Rainier was magnificent. Some ancestor's gift of pioneer blood was aroused within us.

It was Ed who suggested that we make our way down this slope to the glacier and then up to the winding trail above it. Thus we would cut our mileage almost in half and still be doing something different. "Different" was a mild way of putting it, as we learned later.

Ed edged cautiously down the side for about 100 feet before I attempted to start. Absolutely green in this ancient sport, we were equipped with nothing more than home-made alpine sticks. I had leaned heavily on the staff after reaching the thirty-foot level when suddenly the earth evaporated. I fell through air, turned a complete somersault and landed atop my companion. Together we slipped and slid

another fifty feet before a thick clod of sand and gravel grounded us.

My first thought, strangely enough, was of our camera. That precious article was not so much as scratched. However, its owner did not fare as well. We had hurtled 150 feet over glacial ice; treacherously slick. Consequently cuts, bruises and sprains were in order. The two of us presented a bloody, messy-looking spectacle indeed. Finally we regained enough courage to inch and creep the remaining 450 feet to the glacial bed.

One misplaced footstep meant an avalanche of rocks. Our eyes were constantly watching half-ton boulders perched precariously upon those icy ridges. Once we were undecided as to the means of passing a small natural arch of ice blocking our path. Ed went over it while I chose to submerge; thereby solving that one. Again I stepped upon a fateful, balanced rock to find myself once more, feet in mid-air and flat upon my back. At times it seems a spiritual hand must have guided our wandering footsteps.

Our moments of anguish and suspense while trapped for six hours on the largest glacier in the United States makes another story. Yet were I asked whether or not I should care to forfeit that experience, I most certainly should say "No." And every red-blooded fellow will agree with me.

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Afridis

AS GARNET RADCLIFFE says in his story "Green Eyes" in this issue Afridis (as well as the income tax regulations and women) take some knowing. The Afridis derive their importance from their.

geographical position, which gives them command of the Khyber and Kohat roads—passes through the Himalayas—and they have obtained an evil name for ferocity, craft and treachery. However, Colonel Sir Robert Warburton, who lived eighteen years in charge of the Khyber Pass and knew the Afridi better than any other Englishman, says: "The Afridi lad from his earliest childhood is taught by the circumstances of his existence and life to distrust all mankind, and very often his near relations, heirs to his small plot of land by right of inheritance, are his deadliest enemies. Distrust of all mankind, and readiness to strike the first blow for the safety of his own life, have therefore become the maxims of the Afridi. If you can overcome this mistrust, and be kind in words to him, he will repay you by a great devotion."

Just where in this picture there come in the Afridis with green eyes, it is hard to say.

Red Tape

ANOTHER picture of India, not the Northwest frontier, has been sent to us recently by Kenneth P. Wood. The precision of organization and discipline that is the very foundation of military life is always a matter of wonder and admiration to the civilian. He may express impatience with army red tape, yet he has a lurking regard for this very thing which he condemns, because he knows, vaguely, that it has a reason for being and that it is good for men generally to be compelled to respect a silent force as powerful and dignified as this is.

Red tape is a serious matter, not to be lightly treated by any one, soldier or civilian, but the observance of its code to the very letter probably never was more complete than in the case of a native official in India.

This Babu, who was in charge of the documents of a certain town, found that they were being seriously damaged by rats. He wrote to the government to provide him with weekly rations for two cats to destroy the rodents.

The request was granted, and the two cats were installed—one, the larger of the two, receiving slightly better rations than the other.

All went well for a few weeks, when the supreme government of India received the following dispatch:

"I have the honor to inform you that the senior cat is absent without leave. What shall I do?"

The problem seemed to baffle the supreme government, for the Babu received no answer.

After waiting a few days he sent off a proposal:

"In re Absentee Cat. I propose to promote the junior cat, and in the meantime to take into government service a probationer cat on full rations."

The supreme government expressed its approval of the scheme, and things once more ran smoothly in that department.

The Fresh Water Pearlers

RAYMOND S. SPEARS writes us that he's "been collecting fresh-water pearl data ever since I floated down the St. Francis River in 1904—January—in eastern Arkansas and saw a tall darky making queer motions in a scow that had a fence along both sides—bannisters—and he was tonging buttonstock and pearl shells off a 'rock' or bed he had found in the eddy. I drew a pencil and notebook on him and went at it. I'd never heard of buttonshells, baroques, seed pearls, pearls, shapes, muckets—any of those things—and I added a hundred new words to my vocabulary and 10,000 words of first hand data there and during the next three days. I was a river rat in a sixteen-foot skiff. I spent seven months on the Mississippi and adjacent waters. Back home in the Adirondacks, I began to write. I wrote a story about a pearl, and Herman Meyer, Maiden Lane pearl-buyer wrote and told me it was the first pearl story he ever read that was real pearl, and that I had the lingo right.

"Presently I was writing the annual

Fresh Water Pearls article for Jewelers' Circular, and I had about twenty-five pounds of pearl books and reports and hundreds of pearl news clippings and articles. It is a beautiful subject—pearls and gems and jewels inevitably related.

"So 'The Trammel Fork Pearls' really started in 1901-2 when I walked down from Utica, New York, the length of the Alleghanies into Blue Ridge and Upper Tennessee Basin country mountains. I jumped the runs, crossed the creeks on footlogs, met the town, bottoms, Hill Billy, Court House and all those other kinds of people. I saw, but did not then grasp the

significance of the shells shimmering in the shoals of green water. But knowing the people—knowing the pearls, knowing the streams, the mountains, and having been through there at intervals since, I just naturally wrote about them. Pearl lore is more fascinating than pearls to me.

"A sheller on the St. Francis told me about playing taws—marbles—with little tricks he and his brothers used to find in shells in Alabama.

"'Yo' know, I be'n laying off to go back theh, some time—they mout of be'n good!"

"Yours sincerely,

"R. S. S."



OUTLANDS AND AIRWAYS

Strange facts about far
places and perilous air
trails. Send in yours.



Greatest Aerial Survey

FIFTY men, half of them Europeans and half natives, three airplanes of English make, special radio stations, hospitals, workshops and laboratories make up the equipment now in readiness for the greatest aerial survey ever attempted. The largest unknown area in the world, twenty-five million acres of unexplored land, in the Netherlands' half of the Island of New Guinea, is to be mapped by aerial photography. Gold and oil are in them their hills and the airplane is to help find them. Forests of trees, producing the transparent resin used in the manufacture of varnish, are known to exist in this region and the airplane is to bring back photographs showing their location, where the villages are,

and where best to build roads to get this valuable copal gum to market.

Primitive Post Office of the South Seas

WHAT is probably the strangest post office in the world is located on the coast of Patagonia. It consists of nothing more elaborate than a strong beam to which a barrel is attached by an iron chain. On their way through the Straits of Magellan ships drop letters there and take away those which they find, carrying them on to the next port. No officials are required to preside over this primitive post office, and it has no expenses. A similar station, equally primitive, exists on one of the islands belonging to Australia in the Torres Straits.